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TRIO



TRIO  
*Dissertations on*  
SOME ASPECTS OF NATIONAL GENIUS  
  
BY  
OSBERT, EDITH AND SACHEVERELL  
SITWELL

*Delivered as the Northcliffe Lectures  
at the University of London in 1937*

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*Some Aspects of National Genius*

DICKENS AND THE MODERN NOVEL

*Osbert Sitwell*

A number of extracts have been taken for the purpose of these lectures from my book *Dickens*, issued in the "Dolphin" series by Messrs. Chatto & Windus, who have kindly given permission for this use of the material.

OSBERT SITWELL

# DICKENS AND THE MODERN NOVEL

*Mr. Chairman, Ladies, and Gentlemen*

IT IS MY PLEASANT DUTY today to begin the first of a series of lectures entitled *Some Aspects of National Genius*, and my own allotted portion is "Dickens and the Modern Novel"; a title sufficiently elusive and vague to allow me, I hope, to discourse on many things. I have chosen Dickens as a subject for several reasons, chief among which is my great admiration for him as a writer; and another, that he seems to me in many ways to embody the most typical virtues, and sometimes the most typical vices, of the English novelist.

Under the heading I have thus assigned to myself, "Dickens and the Modern Novel," I surmise

that I can deal not only with the actual influence of Dickens on the modern English novel of today—which is in fact not a very considerable one—but also with the possibilities of his influence ; with the direction, as it were, in which he *might* have influenced it, treating him in this respect as a Lost Leader. (It is, indeed, surprising how slender has been his direct contribution, in the main line, to the future, to the development of the English novel. The chief channels by which the effect of his writing has made itself felt have been indirect ones ; by entering, for example, and so becoming part of, the mind of nearly every novelist in the English language)—for there must be few authors who have not read and enjoyed him from their earliest years. He has also re-entered English literature by reflected means ; by acting as an inspiration to foreign authors, who, in their turn, inspired English novelists of the present day) But of these currents that, striking foreign shores from our own, come back to us, I hope to treat at a later stage, and so will for a while abandon them.

And now, before proceeding to other themes, let us consider Dickens as a man ; because recently so much has been alleged, with all the authority of pseudo-science, against him. . . . I do not for an

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instant consider goodness of character to be necessary to the creation of a good book, but nevertheless I do believe that with Dickens' novels an underlying *falsity* would upset their balance and so reveal itself. I think many good books, many excellent in the artistic sphere, have been produced, are being produced—and, still more, are being criticized—by the most detestable persons. On the other hand there are several which have been composed by authors equally charming and agreeable. Moreover, while there is no particular reason why a novelist should be possessed by a motive of a moral nature, there seems, on the other hand, no reason why he should *not* be so inspired: and I fear that one of the several explanations why Dickens is not held at the moment in such wide, popular esteem as in former years, is that his books inevitably induce the impression that their creator is a very kind and agreeable man, possessed of a strong purpose; which was to improve the world, and the lot of the working classes in particular. Further his genius enabled him to accomplish this great labour easily and in an agreeable manner: for to read his novels is a pleasure; whereas most of the writers of today who set out to improve the world, are from the start

debarred from any hope of success in their enterprise because of their absolute unreadability.

Yet for this we must not censure them without making allowances for the greater difficulties under which they labour. Notwithstanding that the people Dickens describes often seem still to live all round us, the outlook which his novels manifest is obviously very unlike our own. He was writing in an age of security, when it seemed as though every obstacle could be conquered. . . . In spite of the misery of his own childhood he soon lived to see a happier and better era; alas! the writer today, of whatever age, has inevitably lived to see a worse. Since the catastrophe of the "Great" War, —and, still more, of the "Great" Peace—it is difficult to write with the same conviction, to believe that right inevitably triumphs, or that it is possible finally to abolish the evils we see all round us. Human fatuity, folly, and malignity—especially malignity—flourish more openly. Furthermore, in England, France, America, and the Scandinavian countries alone has free speech survived, and we must remember that Dickens was a great publicist as well as a great novelist. He would have found an epoch in which free speech was banned in the world at large a precarious one in which to work

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and to live : for he was a democrat, proud of what his work could accomplish in an age in which people could, generally, read, and in which the author was allowed to write, with few exceptions, as he pleased. Because another, though lesser, advantage that Dickens enjoyed was that he lived out his career as a novelist before the introduction of the present libel laws, which afford perhaps even more shelter to the guilty than to the innocent. Had the present libel laws been in existence in his time, we should have been given no Mr. Squeers, no Mrs. Gamp : and no consequent reforms in, for example, scholastic establishments, or in the care of the poor, would have ensued.

Yet the fact that he could, such a short time ago, accomplish so much, that he survived to see so many of his own ideas put into practice, that he tilted at innumerable windmills, and knocked them clean over, should serve as an encouragement to the contemporary novelist who similarly wishes to carry his own opinions into the sphere of action. (The writer of today, however, is all too prone to forget that Dickens triumphantly effected his reforms solely through his mastery of exciting plots, and by the continued interest which his books afford throughout their course down to the very last

page : whereas the modern novel inspired by a purpose such as that of *Bleak House*, for example, or of *Oliver Twist*, is apt to begin as a novel and end as a White Paper. . . . I do not think that Dickens ever allowed his courageous fight on behalf of humanity to lead him *out* of the pages of his novels, but I have no doubt that these books of his accomplished much more toward the attainment of his object than did his open championship of the same causes in the newspapers of the day.

But it is not only the generally prevailing state of uncertainty and inquietude, or our present libel laws, that prevent the writer of today from effecting reforms in the life round him. As a rule, the foremost authors who are intent upon improving the conditions of life for the poor—and, often, it must be said, of debasing conditions for others—seem inclined to take refuge in obscure and mediocre verse, rather than, as Dickens did, to call loudly for what they want in robust novels. Shrinking and whimsical, they only come out, only occasionally, into an arena, wherein the audience is inevitably sparse, and, for the most part, while denouncing all those that live round them in ivory towers, themselves remain, wistful schoolmasters, in towers built not so much of ivory as of the bones

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she must have been a very trying old lady, and albeit her failings again are presented to us with consummate skill, we do not feel that her son was in any way seeking to revenge himself upon her. Nevertheless, in his own life it is rather sad to note that while this great writer completely forgave his father for the part he had played in such a cruel public exhibition of his own child—and it was his father who had been chiefly responsible for it—yet in his heart Dickens never quite pardoned his mother for endeavouring to stop his being removed from such an occupation : though, in this respect, it was the single fault on her side.

Other things of which Dickens is accused, as though they constituted serious offences, are that he liked to affect a foppish and rather vulgar way of dress, and that he enjoyed reading his works aloud ; aspects of his character which help us to understand him and place him in a category, demonstrating that he was an artist of a certain sort, and akin to all poets. For the poet, if he has ever existed, who does not take pleasure in reading his poems aloud to an audience is unworthy of the name. As for his style in dress, it seems to some of us a minor point : the artist is often a peacock, who likes to spread out his plumes in public, to

preen himself, and we need not refute for Dickens the possibility that these qualities, as well as many others, went to the make-up of his complex yet simple personality. They are merely the indication of something of which no proof should be needed—that he was an artist. . . . Then comes the allegation that he had been very kindly treated at the blacking factory by an elder boy named Fagin—a generous, rather clumsy creature,—and that, thirty years later, Dickens bestowed upon the name Fagin an immortal villainy. . . . But for this the name itself must assume the blame : it cries aloud for evil ; and any novelist who failed to take advantage of it should be deprived forever of pen and paper. Last, but not least, Mr. Kingsmill blames him very severely for having a bad pain in his foot (a censure which, at the moment, I must share with Dickens).

Even when he writes so well that his critics cannot deny it, this in their eyes is merely another guarantee of his disgusting nature ; that he displays humour and wit, of a very personal order, makes clear, they say, his subconscious desire to wreak revenge on his mother and father, while that he can describe scenes of horror in a fashion new to English literature and singularly effective, merely evinces his deep dissatisfaction with himself. . . .

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But, in all truth, it is no good telling anyone who has read his books (which are a more perfect expression of their author than the man himself) that Dickens was a bad, proud, vain character ; his novels are clear proof to the contrary. And if the day has dawned when biographers can perceive the character of a novelist through his novels, and through the opinions he expresses in them, then surely the time will come, too, when the novelist will be able to guess at the character of the biographers through their biographies, and detect the mean, sneaking, niggling, Paul-Pry, denigratory, belittling character of some of them from their studies of great men.

Yet after denouncing those modern biographers who will allow Dickens no virtues as man or writer, I would myself like to make one complaint, my only one, of the author before us today ; that though himself such an admirable artist he was peculiarly ignorant, it seems, and innocent, of art outside himself, remarkably unresponsive to it. Seemingly unaware in this of his own hypocrisy, he shared the extraordinary anti-art bias which has possessed most English people since the triumph of Cromwell and the Puritans, and allowed himself in his novels actually to ridicule the artist. Moreover,

even when he attacks the artist, he proves himself to be one ; which perhaps aggravates his offence. Let us consider Mr. Skimpole at breakfast—Mr. Skimpole, the type of parasitic artist, as his creator saw him. In the shaping of his character I believe that Dickens began by liking Mr. Skimpole (who could do otherwise? he had certainly begun by being amiably disposed toward Leigh Hunt, the unfortunate original of the lively sketch which I propose to read to you), but that later, when he brooded over the afflictions visited on wife and children by the light and listless selfishness of the father, he turned against his own creation : in this, memories of his own father may perhaps have influenced him.

Let me read to you now that delightful account of Mr. Skimpole's conversation at breakfast. You will remember the earlier description of him : " He was a little bright creature, with a rather large head ; but a delicate face, and a sweet voice, and there was a perfect charm in him. . . . He had more the appearance, in all respects, of a damaged young man, than a well-preserved elderly one. There was an easy negligence in his manner, and even in his dress . . . which I could not separate from the idea of a romantic youth who had undergone

some unique process of depreciation." But this preface is really rendered unnecessary by the vividness and charm of Mr. Skimpole's conversation, which tells us more about him than any mere physical description, however alert and able.

"Mr. Skimpole was as agreeable at breakfast, as he had been over-night. There was honey on the table, and it led him into a discourse about Bees. He had no objection to honey, he said (and I should think he had not, for he seemed to like it), but he protested against the overweening assumptions of Bees. He didn't at all see why the busy Bee should be proposed as a model to him ; he supposed the Bee liked to make honey, or he wouldn't do it—nobody asked him. It was not necessary for the Bee to make such a merit of his tastes. If every confectioner went buzzing about the world, banging against everything that came in his way, and egotistically calling upon everybody to take notice that he was going to his work and must not be interrupted, the world would be quite an insupportable place. Then, after all, it was a ridiculous position, to be smoked out of your fortune with brimstone, as soon as you had made it. You would have a very mean opinion of a Manchester man, if he spun cotton for no other purpose. He must say

he thought a Drone the embodiment of a pleasanter and wiser idea. The Drone said, unaffectedly, ' You will excuse me ; I really cannot attend to the shop ! I find myself in a world in which there is so much to see, and so short a time to see it in, that I must take the liberty of looking about me, and begging to be provided for by somebody who doesn't want to look about him.' This appeared to Mr. Skimpole to be the Drone philosophy. . . ." Alas, by the time we catch our final glimpse of Mr. Skimpole, Dickens, in his moral fervour, has allowed himself to work up a feeling of contempt and hatred for his delightful creation.

" Mr. Skimpole, lying on the sofa in his room, playing the flute a little, was enchanted to see me. Now, who would receive me, he asked ? Who would I prefer for mistress of the ceremonies ? Would I have his Comedy daughter, his Beauty daughter, or his Sentiment daughter ? Or would I have all the daughters at once, in a perfect nosegay ?

" I replied, half defeated already, that I wished to speak to himself only, if he would give me leave.

" ' My dear Miss Summerson, most joyfully ! Of course,' he said, bringing his chair nearer mine, and breaking into his fascinating smile, ' of course, it's not business. Then it's pleasure ! '

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“ I said it certainly was not business that I came upon, but it was not quite a pleasant matter.

“ ‘ Then, my dear Miss Summerson,’ said he, with the frankest gaiety, ‘ don’t allude to it. Why should you allude to anything that is *not* a pleasant matter? *I* never do. And you are a much pleasanter creature, in every point of view, than *I*. You are perfectly pleasant; I am imperfectly pleasant; then, if I never allude to an unpleasant matter, how much less should you! So that’s disposed of, and we will talk of something else.’ ”

Perhaps, though hardly conscious of its effect, Dickens adopted this attitude towards the artist, because he found it helped him with his large public, who were thus made to feel secure, reading his books without any suspicion that they too were the work of an artist, and no inconsiderable one. But his own art was moralistic, emotional and instinctive; in other things than matters of criticism, in poetry and painting, he exhibited very poor taste (though in this respect it deserves to be noted that he seems, paradoxically enough, to be one of the few English novelists to have found an illustrator worthy of his novels); but when all this has been said—and it is quite enough to have to say of any writer—one can only marvel at the im-

mensity of his achievement. This achievement was to present to the world, with a brilliance hitherto unattained, an England which could—and can—be comprehended in no other way.

(Two things about our country which always struck the foreigner were the peculiarity of its customs, the singular manner in which they precisely reverse continental habits and ways of thought, and, to a certain degree the comfort in which our idiosyncratic islanders subsist.)

From the time of Caesar to that of Casanova, we find the same conception of this strange country, even though the tribes that have inhabited it have differed widely in the intervening years. Casanova, writing in about 1760, tells us “England is different in every respect from the rest of Europe ; even the country has a different aspect, and the water of the Thames has a taste peculiar to itself. Everything has its own characteristic, and the fish, horses, cattle, men and women are of a type I find in no other land. Their manner of living is wholly different from that of other countries, especially their cookery. The most striking feature in their character is their national pride ; they exalt themselves above all other nations. . . . My attention was attracted to the universal cleanliness, the beauty of the country,

the goodness of the roads, the reasonable charges for posting, the quickness of the horses, although they never go beyond a trot ; and lastly the construction of the towns along the Dover Road. Canterbury and Rochester, for instance, though large and populous, are like long passages ; they are all length and no breadth."

This is, indeed, the sort of criticism so often levelled by the Chinese against the Japanese, whom in some respects we resemble. For a small stretch of water appears to effect the most extraordinary separation between the minds of two nations, and we can see for ourselves that the Channel, which can now be crossed by air in a few minutes, still delays the coming of ideas to this country for a full generation. And no doubt the curiously perverse development of these two Empires, so alien to continental ideas, had been originally encouraged by the fact that we both live on islands.

It will be observed further that Casanova singles out two towns as the most typical and curious to the foreign mind. He might well have included in his little list the neighbouring Chatham : and it was to Chatham that Dickens was moved at the age of four, to live there for six most impressionable years. Mr. Bernard Darwin, in his book on

Dickens,<sup>1</sup> says: "If those years neither made nor marred his genius, they did much to decide its direction and provided it with some of its richest material. It was now that the boy came to know and store up for ever in his mind the Rochester of *Pickwick*, of *Great Expectations*, of *Edwin Drood*, the river and the country of the marshes. There was Cooling Churchyard with its little stone lozenges, Pip's small brothers ; Chalk Church with the fat, leering, evil little stone figure over the porch and its nettlegrown churchyard, where a Twist and a Flight and a Guppy lie buried ; the old red house that was to be moved to Bury that Mr. Pickwick might be imprisoned there in a grove of sandwich-bags and then moved back to Rochester for Miss Twinkleton's Academy ; the Cathedral and its icy cold crypt for Jasper's villainies, and tidy cheerful Minor Canon Corner, with its sounding-boards over the hall doors, for the virtuous Dresden Shepherdess Mrs. Crisparkle to live in ; romantic Restoration House for Miss Havisham, and Richard Watts's charity where he himself was to give the Six Poor Travellers the most heavenly of all Christmas dinners. This whole countryside was to be laid under contribution and to pay a rich, unending

<sup>1</sup> *Charles Dickens*, by Bernard Darwin (Duckworth).

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ransom to its conqueror from the time that the Commodore first dropped its passengers at the Bull till Mr. Datchery chalked up his last stroke against Jasper."

It is, then, against this background of robust peculiarity, so typical of his race, that we must first place the figure of Charles Dickens ; and it is a fact worth noting, I think, that the more national an artist seems in his outlook and way of writing, the more he will appeal to foreigners, and so the more international, in the course of time, his fame will eventually become. It is often said that art knows no nationality ; but, surely, every artist should, on the contrary, seek the expression most suitable to his country ? It may be, indeed, in art rather than in politics that nationalism should find its true and beneficent place. Of late years, however, the conceptions of nationality have become so entangled in our minds with the rule of dictators, that it may be necessary to explain that I am not demanding dictators in literature : for already in my working lifetime I have seen several of them reach their apogee and then decline. (Their careers seem shorter in the literary than in the political sphere.) Let me explain what I mean. If it is essential for the English novelist that he should

read a great number of foreign novels to know what is being thought abroad, and what is being accomplished, nevertheless I am convinced that the knowledge that he acquires in this way must be filtered through the sieve of English character and English understanding. The novel, as a form of literature, is one of the most recent and the most fluid ; a matter with which I will deal in my next lecture. Suffice it to say at the moment that it can be used for a thousand purposes and can take on a thousand different forms. It is not—of course there are exceptions—more than two hundred years of age, and it has changed more during the course of these two centuries than any other form of writing. Yet while its growth and development have been interesting and impressive, its contemporaneous decay has been no less marked, and I am not of the opinion that all this commotion is a sign of health.

And one of the chief reasons for this degeneration, I apprehend, is inevitably the great number of translations of foreign novels that have appeared during the last fifty years. Not for a moment that, were I one of the literary dictators of whom I have been speaking, I would attempt to ban translations, good or bad ; but I would much rather see a rough

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and literal rendering, or, as the world would have it, a clumsy and inartistic one, than the most exquisite equivalent that can be found in the English language, because it is of a greater inspirational value to a *writer*. It influences him in a more indirect fashion : since a bad translation often affords him a better idea of that which the foreign novelist intended, in what lay his virtue ; while, most important of all, it imparts a greater stimulus to the imagination, without having the power to influence his style.

For the difficulty today is that there are so many translations, good and bad, that the writer is for ever under one stylistic and ideological influence or another from France, Germany, or Russia. And a foreign tongue in an English mouth makes a bad book. The English author, to change the simile, is now continually and despairingly attempting to graft a Russian mind upon an English body : an abortive operation, doomed from the start, for while it is plain that, let us say, Dostoieffsky or Tcheckoff are great novelists and playwrights respectively, and that in the observation and understanding of the *Russian* character it is almost impossible to proceed further than they have proceeded, this is by no means the direction in

which the English writer should necessarily advance for the comprehension and exploitation of English character.

Actually, of course, the literatures of England and Russia bear a certain superficial resemblance to each other, in the intense idiosyncrasies of character which the writers of both countries are obliged to portray. Even now, in Communist Russia, one imagines that the Russian people are scarcely less individual than in former years. And this perhaps is one of the reasons why Dickens has always been read in Russia with such pleasure. But there are, plainly, other explanations of this vogue. His novels indicate the true nature of the English people: and when we see how typically English his creations appear, even to us of his own race, it affords us some idea of the exotic charm his books must exercise over the foreign reader. A mind without curiosity, of course, finds no attraction in people and opinions beyond its ken, but the apparatus of any writer is malleable; a wax record whereon, at any rate in childhood, the most diverse impressions can be inscribed. Just as the Russian Ballet, when it first arrived, appealed to the most sensitive among the English, because it brought with it the hyperborean charm and all the

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splendour of that lost world, just as the scenery of the South Seas irresistibly appealed to the imagination of Gauguin, just as Rimbaud, the child of provincial France, wished to travel in savage Africa, so the novels of Dickens must offer to the nostalgic minds of the most sensitive Russian and French readers, the great cities of a lost civilization, lands through which they can travel and homes in which they may dwell.

The England, then, that the discerning and sensitive foreigner could dimly perceive through the Victorian fogs which hung over it, was a country inhabited by robust, crude, most peculiar islanders. The cities had not become the hives of polite 'ao-eh-seh' suburbs they are today, the mob yet retained much of its eighteenth-century vigour and savagery, and there existed, in addition, a middle class, wealthy and strong, which had only lately come into being and hardly existed elsewhere in the world. At the peak, were the aristocrats, dwelling in palatial mansions among woods and parks : a class, effete and regrettable, whose purpose in the ordained world could hardly be perceived, unless to point a moral. . . . It was a country, too, with singular physical characteristics, and Dickens shows an extraordinary talent in the exploitation of these

natural phenomena for the creating of his atmosphere. He had a very special feeling for fog and mist and rain—so characteristic, alas, of this northern island—and he allowed no chance to slip him of increasing the dramatic atmosphere in this way. You have countless scenes describing all these common English atmospheric conditions. There is, for example, the beginning of *Great Expectations* in the marshes, the first chapter of *Our Mutual Friend*, and the fog in *Bleak House* . . . where the thick, brown fog preserves, in a sort of half-light, the solicitor's office, from which we obtain our first perspective of a complicated drama, just as the thick, brown varnish preserves the marbled paper on the walls of his rooms.

Consider one of these :

“ Fog everywhere. Fog up the river, where it flows among green aits and meadows ; fog down the river, where it rolls defiled among the tiers of shipping, and the waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city. Fog on the Essex marshes, fog on the Kentish heights. Fog creeping into the cabooses of collier-brigs ; fog lying out on the yards, and hovering in the rigging of great ships ; fog drooping on the gunwales of barges and small boats. Fog in the eyes and throats of ancient Greenwich pen-

sioners, wheezing by the firesides of their wards ; fog in the stem and bowl of the afternoon pipe of the wrathful skipper, down in his close cabin ; fog cruelly pinching the toes and fingers of his shivering little 'prentice boy on deck. Chance people on the bridges peeping over the parapets into a nether sky of fog, with fog all round them, as if they were up in a balloon, and hanging in the misty clouds.

“ Gas looming through the fog in divers places in the streets, much as the sun may, from the spongy fields, be seen to loom by husbandman and ploughboy. Most of the shops lighted two hours before their time—as the gas seems to know, for it has a haggard and unwilling look.

“ The raw afternoon is rawest, and the dense fog is densest, and the muddy streets are muddiest, near that leaden-headed old obstruction, appropriate ornament for the threshold of a leaden-headed old corporation—Temple Bar. And hard by Temple Bar, in Lincoln’s Inn Hall, at the very heart of the fog, sits the Lord High Chancellor in his High Court of Chancery.”

But this continuous attention to detailed description never slows up the tempo of a chapter ; in fact a chapter treating entirely of the riverside slums and containing practically no action at all is

as enthralling to the reader as the more rapid events of, let us say, *Oliver Twist* or *A Tale of Two Cities*. . . . In this how different is Dickens from Thackeray.

Thackeray. . . . When speaking of Dickens it is inevitable to speak of Thackeray. They go down the aisle of literary history, as, for example, Swan and Edgar down that of commercial, hand in hand. . . . When I was a boy one understood that Dickens was immensely inferior to Thackeray. Thackeray wrote about real ladies and gentlemen ; which, very different from that of today, was in those times the object of literature. Dickens was unfortunately addicted, like Hogarth before him, to low life and vulgar humour. But for true refinement, for true literary merit, for an author with a knowledge of Greek and Latin, and versed in the ways of polite society at home as much as in foreign watering-places, one must ~~turn~~ to Thackeray. Thackeray, one understood, was perhaps a little hard on the world, a little over-emphatic in his denunciation of snobs, but otherwise he stood beyond and over criticism.

But today the balance of judgment has altered ; the scales have shifted their position. Now we can see that when Dickens chose to write of the circles with which Thackeray dealt only, his pictures of them are actually much more illuminating, much

more inspired than Thackeray's. Who, for example, could draw a better portrait of Sir Leicester and Lady Dedlock in *Bleak House* than Dickens drew, for he was sufficiently removed from the country magnate to perceive him in his full splendour and strength ; who could better portray the innocent and pompous atmosphere of Dedlock Hall, so full of ennui, and the whole machine of country and county ?

“ My Lady Dedlock has returned to her house in town for a few days previous to her departure for Paris, where her ladyship intends to stay some weeks ; after which her movements are uncertain. The fashionable intelligence says so, for the comfort of the Parisians, and it knows all fashionable things. To know things otherwise, were to be unfashionable. My Lady Dedlock has been down at what she calls, in familiar conversation, her ‘ place ’ in Lincolnshire. The waters are out in Lincolnshire. An arch of the bridge in the park has been sapped and sopped away. The adjacent low-lying ground, for half a mile in breadth, is a stagnant river, with melancholy trees for islands in it, and a surface punctured all over, all day long, with falling rain. My Lady Dedlock’s ‘ place ’ has been extremely dreary. The weather, for many a day and night, has been so wet that the trees seem wet

through, and the soft loppings and prunings of the woodman's axe can make no crash or crackle as they fall. The deer, looking soaked, leave quagmires, where they pass. The shot of a rifle loses its sharpness in the moist air, and its smoke moves in a tardy little cloud towards the green rise, coppice-topped, that makes a background for the falling rain. The view from my Lady Dedlock's own windows is alternately a lead-coloured view, and a view in Indian ink. The vases on the stone terrace in the foreground catch the rain all day ; and the heavy drops fall, drip, drip, drip, upon the broad flagged pavement, called, from old time, the Ghost's Walk, all night. On Sundays, the little church in the park is mouldy ; the oaken pulpit breaks out into a cold sweat ; and there is a general smell and taste as of the ancient Dedlocks in their graves. My Lady Dedlock (who is childless), looking out in the early twilight from her boudoir at a keeper's lodge, and seeing the light of a fire upon the latticed panes, and smoke rising from the chimney, and a child, chased by a woman, running out into the rain to meet the shining figure of a wrapped-up man coming through the gate, has been put quite out of temper. My Lady Dedlock says she has been 'bored to death.'

“Therefore my Lady Dedlock has come away from the place in Lincolnshire, and has left it to the rain, and the crows, and the rabbits, and the deer, and the partridges and pheasants. The pictures of the Dedlocks past and gone have seemed to vanish into the damp walls in mere lowness of spirits, as the housekeeper has passed along the old rooms, shutting up the shutters. And when they will next come forth again, the fashionable intelligence—which, like the fiend, is omniscient of the past and present, but not the future—cannot yet undertake to say.

“Sir Leicester Dedlock is only a baronet, but there is no mightier baronet than he. His family is as old as the hills, and infinitely more respectable. He has a general opinion that the world might get on without hills, but would be done up without Dedlocks. He would on the whole admit Nature to be a good idea (a little low, perhaps, when not enclosed with a park-fence), but an idea dependent for its execution on your great county families. He is a gentleman of strict conscience, disdainful of all littleness and meanness, and ready, on the shortest notice, to die any death you may please to mention rather than give occasion for the least impeachment of his integrity. He is an honourable, obstinate,

truthful, high-spirited, intensely prejudiced, perfectly unreasonable man."

All through his novels, Dickens manifests an early-Christian distrust of wealth and influence. But though possession of money, with a few exceptions, is synonymous with sin, the certainty will prevail among habitual readers of Dickens that very few characters, however poor, will die of want. The hero will inevitably inherit a considerable fortune : for poverty in his novels is only an affliction that the Almighty lays temporarily upon the shoulders of the hero in order that it may later be lifted, and so facilitate the working of the plot.

In order to illustrate, then, his comprehension of the polite world, let me quote again. Who among his readers can ever forget the bewitching and pathetic eagerness of Miss Volumnia Dedlock, that perfect example of a type now nearing extinction, but one which I so well remember dwelling in the recesses of every country-house before the War : the country-cousin, the poor relation ? The passage relates to a parliamentary election. "Volumnia is a little dim, but she is of the true descent ; and there are many who appreciate her sprightly conversation, her French conundrums so old as to have become in the cycles of time almost new again, the

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honour of taking the fair Dedlock in to dinner, or even the privilege of her hand in the dance. On these national occasions, dancing may be a patriotic service ; and Volumnia is constantly seen hopping about, for the good of an ungrateful and unpensioning country. . . .

“ ‘ How are we getting on ? ’ says Miss Volumnia, clasping her hands. ‘ *Are we safe ?* ’ . . .

“ ‘ Volumnia,’ replies Sir Leicester, who has a list in his hand, ‘ we are doing tolerably.’ . . .

“ ‘ I regret to say, Volumnia, that in many places the people have shown a bad spirit, and that this opposition to the Government has been of a most determined and most implacable description.’

“ ‘ W-r-retches ! ’ says Volumnia.

“ ‘ Even,’ proceeds Sir Leicester, glancing at the circumjacent cousins on sofas and ottomans, ‘ even in many—in fact, in most—of those places in which the Government has carried it against a faction— ’ . . .

“ ‘ —Even in them I am shocked, for the credit of Englishmen, to be constrained to inform you that the Party has not triumphed without being put to an enormous expense. Hundreds,’ says Sir Leicester, eyeing the cousins with increasing dignity

and swelling indignation, 'hundreds of thousands of pounds !'

"If Volumnia have a fault, it is the fault of being a trifle too innocent ; seeing that the innocence which would go extremely well with a sash and tucker, is a little out of keeping with the rouge and pearl necklace. Howbeit, impelled by innocence, she asks,

"' What for ? '

"' Volumnia,' remonstrates Sir Leicester, with his utmost severity. 'Volumnia !'

"' No, no, I don't mean what for,' cries Volumnia, with her favourite little scream. 'How stupid I am ! I mean what a pity !'"

"' I am glad,' returns Sir Leicester, 'that you do mean what a pity.'"

Dickens was not a snob—in this differing from Thackeray, whose denunciation of snobs originates in a thorough, personal understanding of them. Moreover, the charges of sentimentality so often levelled against Dickens are in reality far more applicable to the cynical Thackeray. One cannot help but like the more detestable characters in Thackeray's novels. Even Sir Barnes Newcome, that odious, but intelligent arriviste, with his sarcastic tongue and utter lack of ideals it is impossible not to feel some

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sympathy : one understands his difficulties, and his character is real enough to interest us ; but not even the most genteel and innocent of readers can take an interest in that revolting prig and paragon, Colonel Newcome, the epitome of the Old School Tie, or in the doings of his weak-kneed if impetuous son.

Indeed, in the famous passage from *The Newcomes* that occurs in the chapter entitled "In Which Thomas Newcome Sings his Last Song," the reader, if he has any feeling, would most certainly take the part of the villain, Barnes, were it not for the personal intervention and the open partisanship of the author, in the guise of Pendennis.

You will remember that after a succession of rather tipsy, maudlin songs from various persons, the unfortunate moment comes when Colonel Newcome himself stands up to sing. Let me quote : " The cry was then for the Colonel ; on which Barnes Newcome, who had been drinking much, started up with something like an oath, crying, ' Oh, I can't stand this.' . . .

" The Colonel sang, as we have said, with a very high voice, using freely the falsetto, after the manner of the tenor singers of his day. He chose one of his maritime songs, and got through the first

verse very well, Barnes wagging his head at the chorus, with a 'Bravo!' so offensive that Fred Bayham, his neighbour, gripped the young man's arm, and told him to hold his confounded tongue.

"The Colonel began his second verse : and here, as will often happen to amateur singers, his falsetto broke down. He was not in the least annoyed, for I saw him smile very good-naturedly ; and he was going to try the verse again, when that unlucky Barnes first gave a sort of crowing imitation of the song, and then burst into a yell of laughter. Clive dashed a glass of wine in his face at the next minute, glass and all ; and no one who had watched the young man's behaviour was sorry for the insult.

"I never saw a kind face express more terror than Colonel Newcome's. He started back as if he had himself received the blow from his son. 'Gracious God !' he cried out. 'My boy insult a gentleman at my table !'"

Of course in this passage, Thackeray manifests that snobbish preference for the amateur, as opposed to the professional, that characterizes the English race. Had a professional singer, who knew how to sing, stood up, and failed in his exhibition, it would have been a matter for derision. The horrid

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old Colonel had no right to inflict this typical ship's-concert-song on the company at his table any more than Nero had a right to press-gang his subjects to his concerts. If he insisted on doing it, as, in fact, he did, he should most certainly have anticipated the result. And in my opinion he should have been only too pleased when, after he had made such a dreadful exhibition of himself, his affectionate but chuckle-pated son so decidedly took his part, and thereby effected a diversion.

No characters in Dickens are as sentimentally drawn as these two in Thackeray. For company one would much rather have Sir Barnes Newcome or Becky Sharp. And Thackeray was so much more consciously an artist. He seems to be for ever staking a claim to culture. Thus he tries to engage our goodwill on Clive Newcome's behalf by making him an artist ; but it soon becomes apparent from the delineation of his character that if Clive is an artist at all, he must be a shockingly bad one, and that forfeits, except for the genteel, all the good feeling his creator has been building up for him with such labour and evident loving care.

Moreover, with Thackeray it is so easy to decide which are his best books : few could fail to name *Vanity Fair* and *The Newcomes*. With Dickens it is

more difficult. When, as a boy, I first began reading Dickens, it became necessary to find out for myself which they were, and I observed that even those few cultured persons I met who would not openly admit to a dislike of him, invariably singled out two works for their patronizing approbation—*A Tale of Two Cities* and *Pickwick*.

With this opinion I very soon found myself in profound disagreement. Although there are very many wonderful things in these volumes, I must confess to a hearty dislike of both of them. To my mind, one is unbearably sentimental, while in the other, his humour, generally so well founded, as sweetness comes forth from strength, in tragedy and suffering, was too divorced from such qualities for my personal taste. Moreover, it seemed to me that they were not typical, in reality, of his genius: they were apart from the body of his writings (but in that, of course, precisely resided their virtue for those who praised them) and lacked, particularly, one of the chief virtues of his novels I mean the proportion he established between his characters and their background. As a rule each fits the other exactly. There is no waste. You never wish him to cut the description and tell you more of character, nor to cut the character and give you more

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description. With Thackeray this is otherwise. You often find yourself longing for him to stop "pendennising" and get on with his story. No, to my mind, Dickens' genius is manifested most clearly in *David Copperfield*, and, at a distance after that, in *Great Expectations*, *Bleak House*, and *Our Mutual Friend*. |

But to return to Thackeray, his virtues as a writer, and the scenes he paints consummately, are singularly unlike those of Dickens. Dickens, in his novels hardly ever writes of foreign parts. And the two books that deal chiefly with them, are not novels. One is his *Pictures from Italy* and the other his *American Notes*. His *Pictures from Italy* are, to my mind, inept and over-dramatic; his *American Notes* are excellent, because in the day in which he wrote them America was for the most part of English descent and so, in a sense, he was writing again of English people, English people with their faults and merits intensified; but foreigners are to him for the most part either funny or childish or villainous, composing a queer sort of half-caste world. Whereas Thackeray only started to write well and interestingly as soon as his pen crossed the Channel. Wherever it may be, whether he chooses the Virginia of two hundred years before, the

battlefield of Waterloo, or a description of foreign watering-places, their customs and the people who frequent them, he then writes with virtuosity and discrimination. . . .

This perhaps may account in part for the fact, for the preference that foreigners evince for Dickens over Thackeray ; since they must know their own countries so much better than any foreign novelist ever could know them. . . . For instance, the French writers enjoy Dickens with enthusiasm and gusto, because the England which he represents to them lies such a short way across the Channel, and yet is utterly different from anything to which they are—or ever were—accustomed. . . . And so it is in France—and in a quarter hitherto unsuspected—that one finds the carrying on of a certain Dickensian tradition in writing.

A marked resemblance is to be detected between the style of certain passages in Dickens and that of certain passages in Marcel Proust. My attention was first drawn to this affinity by a letter which appeared in the Literary Supplement of *The Times* in 1931. This letter, from a Polish correspondent, after stating that “it was well known that Marcel Proust read Dickens with that luminous enthusiasm and comprehension characterising him,” went on

to submit, as an instance of an anticipated form of thought and style of literature, the following passage :

“ He did not know why. For all that the child observed, and felt, and thought, that night—the present and the absent ; what was then and what had been—were blended like the colours in the rainbow, or in the plumage of rich birds when the sun is shining on them, or in the softening sky when the same sun is setting. The many things he had had to think of lately, passed before him in the music ; not as claiming his attention over again, or as likely evermore to occupy it, but as peacefully disposed of and gone. A solitary window, gazed through years ago, looked out upon an ocean, miles and miles away ; upon its waters, fancies, busy with him only yesterday, were hushed and lulled to rest like broken waves. The same mysterious murmur he had wondered at, when lying on his couch upon the beach, he thought he still heard sounding through his sister’s song, and through the hum of voices, and the tread of feet, and having some part in the faces flitting by, and even in the heavy gentleness of Mr. Toots, who frequently came up to shake him by the hand. Through the universal kindness he still thought he heard it, speaking to

him ; and even his old-fashioned reputation seemed to be allied to it, he knew not how.”

The outlook and sentiments expressed here are of course very different from those of Proust, yet the resemblance is too distinct to rank as mere coincidence. As we know, the French novelist as a young man had greatly admired various English authors of the Age of Steam—Ruskin and George Eliot particularly—and was thoroughly acquainted with the works of Dickens. More sensitive than most of his contemporaries, he appreciated them at their true worth. And we can see plainly that there would be much in it to captivate him in this singularly alien yet familiar world. For just as Dickens, where his sense of Victorian decency was not outraged, would have found Madame Verdurin congenial company, so Proust must immensely have enjoyed such expositions of Dickens’ social sense as the supper in *Nicholas Nickleby*, given in honour of the Collector of Water Rates, and all the introductions that ensue, or the Veneering dinner party. But the likeness is one of imagination and phrasing, as well as of humour. The passage from *Dombey and Son* exists entirely on the imaginative plane. And let us now, in pursuit of this queer comparison, read a few sentences from that chapter

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in which Mr. Brownlow, meeting Oliver Twist for the first time, is searching his memory for the person of whom the child reminds him.

“ After musing for some minutes, the old gentleman walked, with the same meditative face, into a back anteroom opening from the yard ; and there, retiring into a corner, called up before his mind’s eye a vast amphitheatre of faces, over which a dusky curtain had hung for many years. . . . He wandered over them again. He had called them into view, and it was not easy to replace the shroud that had so long concealed them. There were the faces of friends, and foes, and of many that had been almost strangers peering intrusively from the crowd : there were faces of young and blooming girls that were now old women ; there were faces that the grave had changed and closed upon, but which the mind, superior to its power, still dressed in their old freshness and beauty, calling back the lustre of the eyes, the brightness of the smile, the beaming of the soul through its mask of clay, and whispering of beauty beyond the tomb, changed but to be heightened, and taken from the earth only to be set up as a light, to shed a soft and gentle glow upon the path to Heaven.”

Can one not detect in this passage, although

it lacks the scientific level-headed tone of Proust, something a little Proustian in conception and, still more strange, the same cadences of the same voice?

We must confess that Marcel Proust is his own tradition and that, save in the ingenious working of his mind, and its responsiveness, he does not seem peculiarly French, so peculiarly, so directly French as do Flaubert and Maupassant. . . . And here, in order to place the author of whom I am talking, let us consider him in relation to another great French author.

Is it within reason, then, to proclaim as great authors and in the same breath Dickens and his complete antithesis, Flaubert: the Englishman often so diffuse, his art a child of nature, untutored and rather unlettered, even, his stories so intricate and full of knots, turn and double-turn, so free of esthetic theories, albeit so crammed with humanitarian propaganda, his characters so imprisoned in their own world; the Frenchman clear and compact in his thinking, so educated, his novels so carefully observed and studied, albeit still containing in them all the fire that was ever breathed into an author's work to be expressed with the perfection of skill and the utmost poetic feeling? Flaubert's intellect, too, was doubtless of a higher, less fantastic, order:

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in his work there is nothing unbalanced, everything has been passed through the exquisitely fine sieve of his understanding and sensitiveness. There is no direct appeal to the emotions, and his books are esthetic entities, not tinged in the least with propaganda of any kind. . . . But even his infinitely more subtle and lovely creations do not, if you consider them from a distance, live longer in the memory than do the so recognizable and individual ones of Dickens. Yes, in the full sense of their greatness, utterly contrasting in detail, I apprehend they are comparable. Never, perhaps, can we hope to bring forth a novelist of such imaginative perfection, so polished, and at the same time so full of fire, as Flaubert : but we may, notwithstanding, give birth to one who, after the manner of the Russian authors, will be in a sense more important.



*Some Aspects of National Genius*

THE MODERN NOVEL  
ITS CAUSE AND CURE

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*Osbert Sitwell*



# THE MODERN NOVEL : ITS CAUSE AND CURE

THE TITLE WHICH I have chosen for my second lecture is one that inevitably entails a certain responsibility. If, in the future, the processes of decadence which I am attempting to describe at work, are still seen to continue, then I shall not have effected a cure and you will hold the fault to be mine. From a clinical angle the difficulties of diagnosis are only less considerable than the responsibilities incurred. The term "novel," as I have remarked elsewhere, is now used to describe a thousand different kinds of books. Since its false start in the reign of Elizabeth and its true beginning in the age of Charles II, this type

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of literature has been like a snowball gathering substance as it runs downhill. Moreover, during the process of a Gadarene descent it gathered to itself every variety of motive, every description of purpose.

Originating with amusement as a main object, founded in an effort to beguile with tales of adventure the dull hours spent by dullish people in country-houses—in an age, indeed, when, though you may find such a statement hard to believe today, country-houses were almost the only places in which people knew how to read—the novel has, in the course of time, picked up and engrossed every sort of moral and artistic aim.

Let us consider the categories. There are the novels of excitement which still continue to be written, competent, streamlined books which for many of us—though not for me—while away the intolerable ennui of an hour's journey in the train; there are the other novels, of a very ancient kind, which have in reality displaced and assumed the position of the old sentimental ballads; things turned out, I apprehend, for the ever-diminishing class of domestic servants. Melodrama too has been expelled from its home in the theatre, and has found a new abode between the pages of a book. Nor is it

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possible to bar altogether novels of excitement from the realms of literature.

Let us consider the sub-divisions, the different species which compose this one genus alone. First come the machine-turned, smart novels, composed, like modern furniture, of metal and glass, of the late Mr. Edgar Wallace, books of undeniable if misguided cleverness, the recreation of statesmen and proconsuls in the few hours now spared them from their precipitation of another crisis. At the highest point there is such a book as appeared a few years ago : *Malice Aforethought*, in which the thrill is founded on the psychological interest, rather than on the excitement of its events. There are the superb adventures of Sherlock Holmes, books which unite for us the delights of detective fiction with something of the quality of the *Swiss Family Robinson* ; in that, so to speak, if potatoes are wanted, potatoes—or a highly satisfactory substitute for them—are immediately to hand. Then come the books in the American-detective style, in which, so hurried is the life of that dread continent, paragraphs are consumed whole rather than words. By this, I mean that each sentence is part of a *cliché*, to be presumed from the beginning, and that, just as the Chinese possess characters in

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writing which represent not words, but entire sentences, so these works are composed in a similar manner: for the brain can from the first assimilate the *cliché* it knows, from its first word, much more easily than it can apprehend one word alone to which it is not accustomed. Advantage therefore accrues to the user of this method in the extreme ease and swiftness with which even rather an illiterate person—and books today, it must be recognized, are largely written for—and by—illiterate persons—can follow it, and be able to grasp the import of each sentence without undue thought. And here you must remember that, in former times, the world was divided between the lettered and the unlettered. It was impossible to write for the unlettered, since they could not read. But now, in the same way that the hero of a novel, as I hope to show you, can no longer be completely black or white, but an infinite number of gradations go instead to the building up of his character, so the great majority of readers are no longer black or white. You cannot say that they cannot read, and you cannot say that they can.

But let us now revert to our theme and examine the masters of excitement.

There are the pioneer artists in this medium,

Robert Louis Stevenson and Edgar Allan Poe, who exhibit so many levels of interest beneath that of excitement : one, let us say, in the actual fantastic development of the plot, another in the rich accumulation of atmosphere or the intricacy of psychology. How will these old books hold their own ?

Not long ago, I re-read *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, and was astonished at the simplicity of its language and the sureness of its touch. Moreover, in the whole book I discovered only one episode which at all pinned it to an epoch, and that betrayed itself in the character of the person who was murdered. The fact that one of Doctor Jekyll's victims—Sir Danvers Carew—was a Member of Parliament apparently caused, in that remote world, more consternation than the brutality, even, of the murder itself ; whereas in these days, the fact that it was a Member of Parliament who had been murdered, would, I think, without increasing the interest in the murder, relieve rather than deepen the public horror at the crime.

These writers are, of course, of an exceptionally high standard, but even the worst books of the type we have described—low as they are—continue in a sense to fulfil the duties of a novel : alas ! though,

it appears as if the more intelligent the writer, the more concerned he becomes with the world, rather than with the task before him, of making a novel or making money, and the more confused, in consequence, he seems to grow in his conception of what a novel should be.

Thus with Mr. H. G. Wells, novel-writing has replaced religious teaching and has become a kind of scientific and political propaganda, which only his talent as a story-teller and his extraordinary gifts of humour and foresight, enable us to consume. But the hero of his story remains a Victorian hero, with attributes reversed. Moral worthiness has been replaced by scientific ability ; kindness to animals by an interest in vivisection ; the young clergyman yields in interest to the young airman, and an appearance in the Divorce Court, rather than in church as a bridegroom, establishes the chief claim to our sympathy. Nevertheless the character remains essentially the same.

Other authors, certainly, are at work who are not so Victorian in their methods. There is, for example, Mr. James Joyce, an author who has attempted to build up a new language for the use of generations yet unborn—and, in the opinion of many, likely to remain so. Some again are occupied with

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various philosophical or metaphysical aspects, to the exclusion of all else, as is Miss Gertrude Stein : and to prove that Miss Stein's method is, in some cases, successful, I will read you a short excerpt from one of her books. This book is not a novel, but is entitled *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* : " Miss Stein told me to sit with Fernande. Fernande was always beautiful but heavy in hand. I sat, it was my first sitting with a wife of a genius.

" Before I decided to write this book my twenty-five years with Gertrude Stein, I had often said that I would write, the wives of geniuses I have sat with. I have sat with so many. I have sat with wives who were not wives, of geniuses who were real geniuses. I have sat with real wives of geniuses who were not real geniuses. I have sat with wives of geniuses, of near geniuses, of would-be geniuses, in short I have sat very often and very long with many wives and wives of many geniuses." I think this is both good fun and good writing.

Then there are such excellent writers, such gentle artists, as Mrs. Virginia Woolf and Mr. E. M. Forster. Mr. Graham Greene has written recently, in a review of a book by Mrs. Woolf, that it seems as though her character might be a creation of Mr.

E. M. Forster's ; and this proposition can, I think, be paralleled by the other that, similarly, Mr. Forster appears to be a creation of Mrs. Woolf's ; or by the third, that both of them are the posthumous offspring of a hitherto unsuspected union between George Eliot and Ruskin. Mrs. Woolf is a most beautiful writer and, as a critic, without an equal today. As a novelist she can make a fender of consuming interest to the lover of fine prose—she can even make a poor fender a fine fender in prose—but, alas ! the day may come when equality ceases to reign, and fenders will once more yield precedence to man as the proper study of mankind. Thus, for example, had Mrs. Woolf chosen to be a poet rather than a novelist, our gain and loss would have been equal. (Nevertheless, Mrs. Woolf is a poet of still life. . . . Mr. Forster, too, employs words with virtuosity. He creeps over, and burrows under, them. And yet, after reading the exquisite work of these two artists, compared with the novelists of sixty or seventy years ago, it is sometimes a little difficult to decide the exact nature of their themes. . . .) (Indeed, Mr. William Somerset Maugham, though full of individuality, and of an almost Russian curiosity as to his fellow men and the motives that animate them, seems one of the

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few major novelists of the day who are not concerned to choke us with propaganda or bric-à-brac.)

Every novelist worthy of the name, not only possesses an individual style, but has worked out an individual theory on the writing of the novel. Thus Mr. E. M. Forster suggests in his *Aspects of the Novel* that the characters in some novels are two-dimensional and flat : which novels are failures ; while the characters in other novels are three-dimensional and real : which novels are great novels. With this conclusion I cannot agree, for the novel is too diverse to allow of any such dictum. Some " flat " novels may be better than more actual ones, and I am surprised that such an artist as Mr. Forster should have allowed himself to be drawn into what in reality amounts to a mere " slice of life " theory, for the novel is not a slice of life any more than is painting ; it is on the contrary a personal and distorted picture of life which, by some queer sleight of hand, the artist is able to pass off on us as life, and which the reader, thus enabled to employ the lens of the writer, is able to see with the same false clearness. The artist of every sort should be, in fact, the lens between the reader and life. As for the sleight of hand, every great

novelist invents his own tricks.

Let us now continue our examination of various novels and novelists of recent days, proceeding to consider the works of great men : and, where I fail to praise them, I hope I shall be acquitted of the desire to be impudent. Thus, myself, I dislike the novels of Joseph Conrad ; but this is a personal feeling ; and to deny that he was a powerful and vivid writer would be to write oneself down as a fool. It seems to me, however, that *Under Western Eyes*, and such similar literature of excitement, is more successful in his hands than are his more celebrated studies of the psychology of sea captains. Sea captains are interesting more because of their dumbness and constant conflict with the elements, than because of any special and subtle psychological reactions. It is easy to accept Captain Ahab in *Moby Dick*, that terrible, ruthless, and pitiable figure, but it is more difficult to believe in Conrad's nautical heroes : further, though his English is perfect, it is not native to him. It remains a well-cut suit of English cloth displayed by a dummy in a shop window.

(Or, again, there was Hardy, a wonderful poet, but he is only concerned with the lives of peasants, a dying and disillusioned race. (No revival in

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farming, alas, can bring back to life the English novel as it was.) Indeed, it is better at the moment to discuss Hardy, so great is still the glamour of his name, and yet so strenuous the act of reading his novels ; for the actual method of them, the fact that he began writing so long ago, makes them particularly difficult to read ; it is like travelling in a four-wheeled cab or wagon when you know you can proceed more swiftly and easily by other means. For Flaubert altered the whole speed and machinery of the novel, altered it for ever, and Hardy, although he died so recently, is a pre-Flaubertian author. Moreover, in the novels of Hardy there is one fatal flaw in technique : he holds up time ; he stands, in a novel, like a man attempting to dam a stream ; and that sense of time passing, as Proust has shown us in so many immortal volumes, is of the very essence of the novelist's art, for we occupy, he says, more space in time than, if one can say so, space in space. The threescore years and ten of a man's life must be of more importance to him than the journey, say, from Paris to London and back, or even to Australia. Indeed, he goes further, ranking this sense of the passage of time in the novel as the greatest task and achievement of the novelist. Time, according to Proust, is the only element that con-

cerns mankind ; it pours fresh contours on to the human body and on to the human face ; it removes them as easily. The man we see today is the same man, and yet not the same man, as we saw ten years ago.

You will expect me to mention the names of many other novelists, but I shall not do so, for many of the books we should be forced to consider are not novels at all. Indeed, the best thing, perhaps, would be to find a new name for the commercial novel—for there are, unfortunately, all too many of our contemporaries whose novels, though their authors may be quite unconscious of the fact, are not literature, but a commodity, like sugar or cotton, in which publishers may gamble ; they are subject to slumps and booms, and those interested in the production of such things should be considered by us not as writers, far less as artists, but as financiers and business men. Thus, instead of reading "The well-known novelist, Mr. X. Y. Z., is at present at work on a new masterpiece," we should read "The well-known plot-seller, Mr. X. Y. Z., is at present planning a new financial coup." Alas ! the novels of such people are not merely commodities, they are also in the nature of a drug, in that they become necessary to those who

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are in the habit of consuming them. Further the cure of the novel-reader is the same as the cure of the drug addict : the only chance of his recovery is to nauseate him, to give him novels ever so much worse and more dangerous to his mind than those to which he has accustomed himself. A further cause of the decay of the novel is, I think, to be sought in criticism. . . . There are two ways today of writing novels, in one of which an appeal is made direct to the uneducated, without the necessity of recommendation ; the second method is to write a novel which will appeal to the critics, so that they recommend it to readers who are not strong enough to form their own judgment. In order to attain to this, it is necessary for the novelist to pander to any common denominator that may exist between various critics, such as Mr. Harold Nicolson and Mr. James Agate ; and even when we find this magic formula, it is not always consonant with the interests of literature.

Yet some of these writers, however degraded their books, are readable, the first duty of every novelist ; whereas the most perfect artists are often crotchety, influenced by some particular duty to the extent of unreadability. Their rather complacent appreciation of their status as artists leads them to

ignore the fact that the reason that authors are read many years after their bodies have perished is, first and foremost, because they are *readable*. (By this I do not mean a lack of obscurity ; many extremely obscure writers are eminently readable—that is, they are born writers, and once the reader's eye has lit upon a word, it continues to be interested and to read on.) But after this, I hold that the chief aim of the novelist should be to illuminate personal experience. Surely a novelist should seek to identify himself to such a point with the reader that the reader responds, crying “This is I ! How often have I experienced this, and now I understand it !” But to do this is not as easy for an author as it sounds. Personal experience is not so universal as it is deemed, and even this effort to identify reader and author cannot succeed unless the whole novel is designed.

And that, alas ! is where as a race the English fail as novelists. They are always writing outside the covers of their books ; adventures and ideas swarm out of them into the air. This Gothic love of detail, this wealth of imagination, these depths and pinnacles of thought, must be more disciplined, and yet not so severely as to trim them of their character : for one cannot impose, as George Moore so interest-

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ingly attempted, a French form upon the English novel.

How typical, then, of English novelists is Dickens. He shows their genius at its best : and yet his failings—which never ruin his books—are those of nearly all English writers. His pen-pictures are splendid and lively, as clearly limned as a Dutch interior, every attitude and accent true : yet how much better in that they hold to life's movement a mirror that slightly distorts it, imparting to the whole composition an added point and emphasis, the shadow caught by Daumier, or the caustic beauty of Hogarth or Rowlandson, where, reversing the process to which we are usually accustomed, the rind is sweet and the fruit bitter.

Let us take Oliver Twist, one of the master's early novels, and by no means the best. . . . The intricacy of the plot is quite marvellous, and allows no flagging of interest. The action is continuous and elaborate, so pleasingly involved, that one can almost see, as through the glass front of an old-fashioned clock, the machinery working up before it strikes. And strike it does ! Everyone is ultimately revealed as some other character's brother, sister, or son. The most complex relationships,

worthy of an eighteenth-century Bourbon prince, are unravelled. Nevertheless, improbable as such happenings might be outside these pages, within them they become real, startlingly real. Weighed down to earth with the living weight of Fagin, Nancy, the Dodger, and Mr. and Mrs. Bumble, the book seems solidly anchored to the world we know, and this illusion is in no way impaired by its fantastic, and yet simple, complication.

But, as soon as the clock has struck, the machinery can be seen very quickly running down : running down much faster than it worked up. The concluding chapter resembles the final scene in a revue, or the ultimate ten minutes of a musical comedy. The comedians obtain a last regretful smile from the audience, even while vice is punished and virtue recompensed. The rewards are as delightful as the punishments are severe, for Dickens, like Saturn, never scruples to devour his children : or, again, like Abraham, his knife is ever ready to sacrifice when the divine call sounds. Now the ominous creaking of the halter in the dark wind, which has sounded all through the book, is substantialized. Sikes hangs himself accidentally : Fagin watches the Judge place the black cap on his head, and listens to the roar of the crowd outside

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as they hear the news of his sentence : Monks dies of a "loathsome disease," a favourite phrase and device of Dickens where his villains were concerned ; and even the poor Bumbles are doomed to die miserably in the workhouse over which they had so long tyrannized. Everyone else is happily married and sufficiently rich . . . and so we actually believe them to be, such is the reality of the book. Moreover, the very words lead you on, entice you to read chapter after chapter. . . . And surely, notwithstanding that there are still those who deny his right to such a description, this is an attribute of the story-teller who is, in addition, an *artist* ?

At one time, however, I, too, doubted his title to it. That Dickens was one of the few novelists who, infusing their books with other than purely esthetic notions, had converted them into a weapon, something altogether more charged with seriousness than a mere novel, was, of course, plain from the beginning.

Like H. G. Wells after him, he was, as a writer, among other things an exponent of direct action, visibly changing the everyday life round him by force of the ideas so ably advocated through the medium of his fiction, although this propaganda was not scientific, political, or philosophic, but

consisted in an invocation, in no way sentimental in itself, despite the indisputable sentimentality of various passages, to humanitarian feeling; a plea to ameliorate conditions in a world which, owing to the growth of the great cities, had become visibly harder, more muddled and more brutal. And, through the agency of his works, the lives of thousands of human beings, in hospitals and work-houses, factories, slums, and prisons, had, indeed, been improved out of all recognition.

But on re-reading *Oliver Twist*, I felt that fresh claims should be entered for Dickens, in respect of two particulars: first as the originator of the modern "thriller," the father—and a parent how much more lively and entertaining than his children!—of *Sherlock Holmes* and all the numerous subsequent tales of crime, detected, through coincidence or by means of consummate ability, and then punished with a striking and enviably appropriate justice; and, far more important, as an artist who, quite apart from being a born story-teller, with, in addition, a stupendous gift of words, had contrived to equip himself with an extraordinary and personal technique.

The first claim, that he is a master of sensational plots and continued excitement, that it is difficult

to stop reading a book by him, so powerfully does the action of it grip you, is the more easily substantiated and can, indeed, hardly be contested. The second is more difficult to establish, for many, even of those who love him, are so blinded by the splendour of his humanitarian achievement, or have so sated themselves with the variegated riches of his humour, that it seems to them of minor importance, while those who dislike his writings will reject it outright. Once these two claims are admitted, the problem of a just and proper critical estimate of his work becomes all the more pressing.

Charles Dickens, then, I believe, was the first English novelist to comprehend the haphazard and ramshackle romance of the nineteenth-century great cities : the first to be able to dramatize and present it to the world : in this the forerunner of countless writers. So true are his descriptions, not to the modern, Cosmopolis-skyscraper, German and American conception of a city, but to the dreary and tortuous wastes that still exist everywhere in England, that we are constantly surprised to discover how long ago they were written, for he depicts these strange and terrible places, the life that slinks through their alleys, as much as the sudden ebullitions of the market-places, with an unequalled

mastery and insight. The teeming existence, a riot or a mob running after a pickpocket, is not reproduced more faithfully, or more formidably, than the sinister vacuums which its turmoil shelters. Consider the "Stop Thief!" passage in which the mistaken crowd pursues Oliver Twist: and think, then, of the opening of *Our Mutual Friend* and the boat upon the black waters of the Pool of London.

"Allied to the bottom of the river rather than the surface, by reason of the slime and ooze with which it was covered, and its sodden state, this boat and the two figures in it obviously were doing something that they often did, and were seeking what they often sought. Half savage as the man showed, with no covering on his matted head, with his brown arms bare to between the elbow and the shoulder, with the loose knot of a looser kerchief lying low on his bare breast in a wilderness of beard and whisker, with such dress as he wore seeming to be made out of the mud that begrimed his boat, still there was business-like usage in his steady gaze . . .

" . . . But, it happened now, that a slant of light from the setting sun glanced into the bottom of the boat, and, touching a rotten stain there which bore some resemblance to the outline of a muffled

human form, coloured it as though with diluted blood. . . .

“. . . The red light was gone . . . and his gaze, which had come back to the boat for a moment, travelled away again. Wheresoever the strong tide met with an impediment, his gaze paused for an instant. At every mooring chain and rope, at every stationary boat or barge that split the current into a broad-arrow-head, at the offsets from the piers of Southwark Bridge, at the paddles of the river steamboats as they beat the filthy water, at the floating logs of timber lashed together lying off certain wharves, his shining eyes darted a hungry look.”

(Even if here the writing at times verges on melodrama, is a little strained, yet it never fails of its effect—and what a relief, in these days of “under-writing,” as of “under-acting,” to read full-bodied prose with plenty of sweeping contours. We are never left in uncertainty of the direction in which the language is hitting ; it contains nothing empty and unaimed. But the most potent sign of his genius is that after having read a whole page we find that its effect is far greater than we could have imagined from the perusal of any individual sentence in it.

But however clearly such extracts show him to be a master novelist and an artist in writing, his delineation of character proves it to a still greater degree, and places him beyond ordinary criticism and in a class by himself, with no contemporary rival. Here we see him, again, as a prototype, an innovator, wielding with perfect ease a technique toward which others are even now but struggling; the inventor of "expressionism" in fiction; a writer a hundred years ahead of his time. (All the properties of his characters are perfectly fitted to them, and have been designed to reveal their true disposition and heighten the appropriateness of it to their appearance, and, beyond that, to facilitate their various courses through the book. For those purposes, too, he makes use of a wilful and superb distortion, perfectly maintained and congruous throughout each novel, and one which bestows upon its object ever so much more of an authentic existence than could any merely "life-like" method. Imagery now comes to his aid, to endow him with an unthinkable virtuosity.) Page after page could be quoted in support of these statements, and, indeed, it is difficult to refrain from giving them . . . that tremendous supper-party, staged by the Kenwigs in honour of the Collector

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of Water Rates, from *Nicholas Nickleby* ; the dinner given by the Veneerings in *Our Mutual Friend* : but we must be content with one or two short quotations from *David Copperfield*, which, however, should suffice. The first is a description of the warder-like Miss Murdstone, sister to David's stepfather, on his first seeing her:

Consider this passage :

“ It was Miss Murdstone who was arrived, and a gloomy-looking lady she was ; dark, like her brother, whom she greatly resembled in face and voice ; and with very heavy eyebrows, nearly meeting over her large nose, as if, being disabled by the wrongs of her sex from wearing whiskers, she had carried them to that account. She brought with her two uncompromising hard black boxes, with her initials on the lids in hard brass nails. When she paid the coachman she took her money out of a hard steel purse, and she kept the purse in a very jail of a bag which hung upon her arm by a heavy chain, and shut up like a bite.”

And, again of the same lady :

“ She began to ‘help’ my mother next morning, and was in and out of the store-closet all day, putting things to rights, and making havoc in the old arrangements. Almost the first remarkable thing I

observed in Miss Murdstone was her being constantly haunted by a suspicion that the servants had a man secreted somewhere on the premises. Under the influence of this delusion, she dived into the coal-cellar at the most untimely hours, and scarcely ever opened the door of a dark cupboard without clapping it to again, in the belief that she had got him.

“ Though there was nothing very airy about Miss Murdstone, she was a perfect Lark in point of getting up. She was up (and, as I believe to this hour, looking for that man) before anybody in the house was stirring.”

No commercial writer, no pure student of life, no simple philanthropist, no one but a consummate artist ever slanted his pen at such an angle: yet such instances of swift and masterful distortion are exactly what those who attempt to dismiss this great writer mean, when they charge him with “exaggeration”!

Nevertheless, having to our satisfaction established him on this higher level, we are left with the curious problem of his art, wherein the faults are as salient and consistent as the merits. How, we ask ourselves, could he descend to such levels?

Let me quote this scene between Dora Spenlow and David Copperfield.

“ ‘ But, Dora, my beloved ! ’ said I, at last . . .  
‘ I was going to mention something. ’

“ The Judge of the Prerogative Court might have fallen in love with her, to see her fold her little hands and hold them up, begging and praying me not to be dreadful any more.

“ ‘ . . . But, Dora, my love, if you will sometimes think,—not despondingly, you know ; far from that !—but if you will sometimes think—just to encourage yourself—that you are engaged to a poor man—’

“ ‘ Don’t, don’t ! Pray don’t ! ’ cried Dora.  
‘ It’s so very dreadful ! ’

“ ‘ My soul, not at all ! ’ said I cheerfully. ‘ If you will sometimes think of that, and look about now and then at your papa’s housekeeping, and endeavour to acquire a little habit—of accounts, for instance—’

“ Poor little Dora received this suggestion with something that was half a sob and half a scream.

“ ‘ —It would be so useful to us afterwards,’ I went on. ‘ And if you would promise me to read a little—a little Cookery Book that I would send you, it would be so excellent for both of us. For our path in life, my Dora,’ said I, warming with the subject, ‘ is stony and rugged now, and it rests with

us to smooth it. We must fight our way onward. We must be brave. There are obstacles to be met, and we must meet, and crush them! ’ ’

And then, even while we are yet querulous, we realize that we have finished the chapter and are beginning the next, which will in all probability compensate us in full for our suffering. Thus to take *Oliver Twist* again, having disgusted his discerning readers with the appallingly fatuous first interview between Rose Maylie and Nancy, Dickens proceeds at once to give them page after page of unsurpassed brilliance and interest. Chapter follows chapter, each better than the last : the second interview, on the steps of London Bridge, is good : the murder of Nancy by Sikes wonderful : and finally, the author rises on the wings of his genius to that terrific scene where Charley Bates throws himself upon Nancy’s murderer. And herein Dickens achieves one of the most difficult feats known to the writer of fiction, inasmuch as he causes a character, created, and all through the book produced as essentially comic, to be transmuted to the heights of heroism without any apparent flaw or break in its continuity.

Yet even so, we are left with the question : how has he persuaded us to read on ? For it is not

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altogether owing to the knowledge that his lapses will be atoned for by the delights to follow them.

The answer, I think, is that he carries us through these perilous straits by the rush and energy of his prose. "Energy" I use for want of a better term, seeking to indicate a singular fusing of fluency and a continual sense of direction, with the power to depict in words that will automatically arouse the emotion intended in the reader. There are those, I know, who object bitterly to the prose-style of this author, or altogether deny him one, charging him with a tendency to dip into unintentional blank verse whenever he wishes to move us. Yet any prose-style that sweeps the reader on with it is justified. How often, in reading the work of a stylist—Pater, for example—does one not discover that it is the very style for which the author is so celebrated that holds the reader in check, acting as a barrier between transmitter and receiver? Moreover, about Dickens' use of language, even when he is being sentimental there is nothing namby-pamby; and if only some of the more "precious" authors, who object to his manner, would display, among their arrangements of words, which recall those Victorian screens composed of designs carried out in decaying autumn leaves and pressed flat under

glass, one tithe of his inspired vigour, we would willingly forgive them whole folios of fortuitous blank verse.

It is possible, furthermore, that, in addition to the quality of energy, there is another reason for the success with which he leads on, so triumphantly, to the end of each book. As a thing apart, the design of his novels, I hold, is of a finer order than many people allow, and it may be that the sickly passages alluded to help to preserve throughout the book an absolute function of integral balance, which is of actual esthetic service to it. Then, the vulgarity, such as it is, of these fragments is so evident, frank, and childlike, so small a thing compared with the fire of generosity which, its counterpart, flickers under every page, that we are disarmed.

In my last lecture I indulged in some comparisons between Dickens and the French novelists. Let us now turn to the works of the great Russians ; let us compare the novels of Dickens with those of Dostoieffsky, whom so many people consider the greatest novelist of all time. Is it possible that a parallel is to be traced between these two writers ? . . . At first it may seem absurd, because Russian and Englishman is each so intensely national in his

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flavour. Yet both are artists, and both, despite that honour, seek in the first place to serve humanity ; a purpose of which, as I said in my last lecture, great novels are occasionally made the vehicle, though, as may be deduced from such great and exquisite work as that of Flaubert, it is not intrinsically necessary to them. Both writers, again, are adept at the description of horrors, can communicate a haunting sense of fear, an atmosphere of gathering violence and evil, which is, developed to this degree, an unusual ability. It is not easy, for instance, to decide whether the murder of Mr. Montagu Tigg in *Martin Chuzzlewit* or that in *Crime and Punishment*, is the more awe-inspiring and convincing. Each author, too, introduces pages that are irritating in the extreme, so that the reader cries, "If only someone would edit them !" and then, omitting to read them, feels their loss, since it is equally impossible to condense *The Brothers Karamazoff* or *Martin Chuzzlewit*. Dostoieffsky does not, it is true, apostrophize to the same enraging extent as Dickens, but then, again, Dickens is guiltless of the soft, pulpy mysticism—that reverse side to the brutal knout spirit—in which the Russian novelist revels, and therefore spares us the masses of private but muddled thinking in which his

characters indulge. On the other hand, both of them in every line they pen betray a strong moral sense ; albeit in Dostoieffsky's case one that is so completely perverted that, had he composed *Oliver Twist*, Fagin and Sikes, rather than the villains, would have constituted the epileptic and murderous, but still interesting and immensely psychological, heroes of the story. Indeed, toward the end of it, Dickens himself appears inclined to adopt what may perhaps be termed a Russian view of Fagin : and the horrible old Jew, as he sits, with a bandage round his head, biting his nails in the condemned cell, is transformed into a somewhat more pitiable and less repellent character.

But this is unusual with the English writer : his villains are created too much as villains. In illustration of this let me quote the character of Mr. Ralph Nickleby :

“ He wore a sprinkling of powder upon his head, as if to make himself look benevolent ; but if that were his purpose, he would perhaps have done better to powder his countenance also, for there was something in its very wrinkles, and in his cold, restless eye, which seemed to tell of cunning that would announce itself in spite of him. However this might be, there he was ; and as he was all

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alone, neither the powder, nor the wrinkles, nor the eyes, had the smallest effect, good or bad, upon anybody just then. . . .

“ Mr. Nickleby closed an account-book which lay on his desk, and, throwing himself back in his chair, gazed with an air of abstraction through the dirty window.”

The very discovery of Mr. Nickleby, seated of his own free will before an account-book, is sufficient promulgation of his guilt and villainy—a trait in the author to which I refer in a few moments. . . . Moreover, another difference between Dickens and Dostoieffsky is that Dickens so obviously enjoys paying his villains back in their own coin ; a necessity which Dostoieffsky always as plainly regrets. In fact, though both novelists make a continual plea for the under-dog, thoroughly to earn Dostoieffsky’s sympathies, the under-dog must be rabid into the bargain : while, on the contrary, the extent to which Dickens relishes his *own* punishment of his *own* villains will be seen by the following passage from *Nicholas Nickleby*, in which, in the guise of vice and meanness, Mr. Nickleby is consigned to outer darkness :

“ Creeping from the house, and slinking off like a thief ; groping with his hands when first he got

into the street, as if he were a blind man ; and looking often over his shoulder while he hurried away, as though he were followed in imagination or reality by some one anxious to question or detain him ; Ralph Nickleby left the City behind him and took the road to his own home.

“ The night was dark, and a cold wind blew, driving the clouds furiously and fast before it. There was one black, gloomy mass that seemed to follow him : not hurrying in the wild chase with the others, but lingering sullenly behind, and gliding darkly and stealthily on. He often looked back at this, and more than once stopped to let it pass over ; but, somehow, when he went forward again, it was still behind him, coming mournfully and slowly up like a shadowy funeral train.”

Could any author have written of it with more relish ? . . . And in this attitude, too, Dickens manifests his essentially English nature. It is on a par with the severe notes of reprimand and warning which our statesmen are in the habit of continually sending to the governments of other Powers. Indeed, it is impossible for us to exaggerate the significance of Dickens to us of his race : and the clue to the difference which exists between him and any European novelist must be sought, again and again,

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in the simple fact of his nationality. What we lose by our crotchetiness; we gain in richness. The Gothic character of our people continues. We are not rational, we are not even, perhaps, particularly subtle (although many English writers have excelled in subtlety); but we do show a quite extraordinary richness of imagination, a great intricacy of detail; we can reach heights and depths which are not permitted to writers of all nations, for we have—that is to say, the best literary minds of each age have—usually either a poetical or a political or a scientific axe to grind.

All the racial characteristics are to be traced in his work; and this, in addition to the excitement of his plots, is the explanation of the hold he has always maintained upon a large public, not usually given to reading, who can, even today, recognize that his types are true ones, living all round them, and to whom the ways of thinking of any foreign writer would seem alien, and even eccentric.

For example, his moral paragons remain virtuous and true to the end, just as his villains remain villains: and yet, trying as these can be, his treatment of them never wholly defeats its own purpose, whereas other writers, seemingly more impartial,

never wearing, as does this great novelist, a heart carelessly pinned upon the sleeve, but rather a half-heart, blazoned discreetly upon a partly concealed and tear-stained handkerchief, unintentionally inveigle us into a ferocious championship of the licentious, malevolent and down-treading, against the persecuted and the pure. Thus the quietly argued, cautious pleading of Mr. Galsworthy, so strictly unbiased and wanting in any vulgar, melodramatic appeal, often, so far from attaining its object, persuades us to hope that the wealthy and careless wastrel, who leaves silver boxes about to tempt poor people, will prosper, and that the respectable and "really-awfully-nice" charwoman, who has led so hard a life, will incur a severe and quite unmerited punishment for a theft she has never committed.

Dickens, then, was a moralist ; and it is not surprising that often, when it is a visual picture he conjures up for us—and, indeed, he is a very pictorial writer—we are reminded of Hogarth. The scenes in Newgate, by painter and writer, even though the passing of a century divides one from the other, are practically identical, interchangeable. *Marriage à la Mode* or *A Rake's Progress* are the equivalent in paint of Dickens' writing. There is to

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be distinguished in them, in picture and in book, the same ethic foundation, the same love and use of detail, in illustration of the theme, the same democratic distrust of a "profligate aristocracy," a suspicion caused in part by the more cosmopolitan tendency of the richer classes. Further, that vein of savagery, that love of the grotesque, which runs through so much of the best literary and pictorial English work of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, is manifest in both of them, although in these two instances harnessed to a purely humanitarian purpose, which bestows upon it a double force. Nevertheless, just as our caricaturists and cartoonists, when they were effective and propagandist (instead of being content, as they are now, to hold up a flattering mirror to the countenance of the middle classes), appeared to delight in deformities such as elephantiasis and facial distortion ; to find material for ferine and raucous laughter in bloated faces, red and warty, in protruding teeth, and long nut-cracker chins and noses, in figures gigantically, horribly fat or so wasted as to show the flat and angular bones, and a thousand other forms of physical anomaly, so, too, Dickens makes use of a certain brutal emphasis, though this had been somewhat levigated by the polite ideas

of the nineteenth century, and is never employed except in order to engage the pity of the reader or arouse his anger on behalf of true justice. But though such an aim was doubtless, in his eyes, necessary to excuse the means, it must be owned that the virtuosity of his method betrays a certain satisfaction in it, for there was nothing amorphous about his Christian kindness, and it was inspired with a sharply-outlined, crusading spirit.

Not only has Dickens this moralistic basis and bias that we have noted, so alien to the spirit of any French author—but he displays, in his working-out of it, that extraordinary English team-spirit, cultivated in every branch of our life, however unfortunate, from politics to athletics, from athletics to the editing of *Punch*, and in his every novel we witness what can only be described as a “Virtue v. Vice Cup Final.” However, though from the beginning we are aware, as the result of experience, that the poor and the good will triumph after a hard-fought match, this is never allowed to spoil the reality of his books or cramp their appeal to the reader: on the contrary, he is artist enough to capture our interest and retain it until the finish.

Even in Dickens’ minor traits, one cannot but be surprised how his intensely national flavour

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emerges. Thus, whatever our faults, I take it that we are a generous nation, giving freely of our money, too freely, and somewhat disposed to hold thrift, whether national or particular, in contempt. Moreover we like the individual who spends easily and takes not too much heed for the morrow. Similarly, when we read Dickens, we observe that his heroes are never concerned for their next day's bread ; quite penniless and without prospect, they never hesitate to knock down their stingy employers and flounce out of the office. Like Elisha, their creator delights to provide for them. Prudence and forethought, it is evident, are not the virtues upon which he sets store ; indeed, the greatest obloquy, the deepest circle of his hell, is reserved for the miser ; and reading *Oliver Twist* we begin to perceive that the real offence of Fagin, far worse than any crimes he committed or caused to be committed, was that of hoarding up his tainted treasure.

Let us consider this little picture of one who in the novels of other nations might be raised to the status of an "international financier and philanthropist" :

" . . . he turned round and looked at Oliver, and called him by his name. He did not answer, and was to all appearance asleep.

“ After satisfying himself upon this head, the Jew stepped gently to the door : which he fastened. He then drew forth : as it seemed to Oliver, from some trap in the floor : a small box, which he placed carefully on the table. His eyes glistened as he raised the lid, and looked in. Dragging an old chair to the table, he sat down ; and took from it a magnificent gold watch, sparkling with jewels.

“ ‘ Aha ! ’ said the Jew, shrugging up his shoulders, and distorting every feature with a hideous grin. ‘ Clever dogs ! Clever dogs ! Staunch to the last ! Never told the old parson where they were. Never peached upon old Fagin ! And why should they ? It wouldn’t have loosened the knot, or kept the drop up, a minute longer. No, no, no ! Fine fellows ! Fine fellows ! ’

“ With these, and other muttered reflections of the like nature, the Jew once more deposited the watch in its place of safety. At least half-a-dozen more were severally drawn forth from the same box, and surveyed with equal pleasure ; besides rings, brooches, bracelets, and other articles of jewellery, of such magnificent materials, and costly workmanship, that Oliver had no idea, even of their names. . . . ”

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Obviously here Oliver's lack of knowledge and taste is manufactured into a claim upon our pity and esteem, whereas a French novelist—Pierre Loti, for example, and even, perhaps, André Gide—would glory, and the reader with him, rather, in young Oliver's estheticism, in his familiarity with lapis, sardonyx, ivory, jacinth, chrysoprasus, and the rest of those precious materials so dear to the heart of the writer of *Revelation* : while the old “fence” himself would win a certain sympathy on account of his connoisseurship.

After the manner of Dickens would Hogarth, too, or the spendthrift Rowlandson have presented this gloating soliloquy of Fagin's, and with an identical gusto. Yet, on the other hand, and illogically enough, all of them were shocked by the lavish expenditure of the luxurious rich : they liked the poor to spend money they did not possess, more than they cared for the rich to waste that which they had.

Nevertheless, as well as sharing some of the national traits, he is expert at portraying others which he scorns, and where, psychologically speaking, Dickens was able to blaze a trail was in his revelation and treatment of that peculiarly Anglo-Saxon vice, hypocrisy ; which, growing from a

minute English puritan root in the seventeenth century, was in his day creeping like their own suffocating yellow fogs over life in the industrial cities of England and North America.

Dickens, then, succeeds in convincing us, makes us at any rate accept his point of view, by means of an inflammatory and sustained arraignment of injustice, and also because he makes us understand that it is not that he regards poverty in itself as a virtue, but that he resents the rich behaving as if it were a crime. Each book of his discloses, crowded with figures, a wide panorama, in which there are always—so long as they are not misers—a few rich and virtuous people, and, inevitably, a great many poverty-stricken rogues : but, notwithstanding that he does not consider the rich naturally and wholly bad, it is undoubtedly a symptom of this author's dislike for any particular poor individual, should he display him to us as eager to make money. Again, in this, we may detect a national trait : a sense of fair play.

The truth is, I apprehend, that Dickens' sense of social justice, above all his love of humanity, were too strong to allow him to attain to any ultimate perfection of art. Typically English, in character as much as in outlook, he remains more interested in

life than in art. His courage, in matters of observation, was equal to his insight : and the picture, for example, of the United States in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, or in his *American Notes*, is one that, because of its devastating truth, even to this day, will never be forgiven him. As a novelist he does not, as I once thought, stand entirely outside art : on the contrary, himself remains with one foot outside his novels, but his art entices you to enter and remain. He resembles, it may be said, the God of the Old Testament, creating a world and its inhabitants, whom he delights to punish and reward, rather than a novelist reproducing the life around him. But his greatness resides in this very fact. Triumphant he creates a world : and the creation is immense and magnificent.

Indeed if England were suddenly to be submerged by the steely arrows of her rain beneath her grey waves, and no vestige of her left save the works of two authors, Shakespeare and Dickens, yet our country would continue to have a very real existence in the minds of those who learnt to read this dead language. Shakespeare would be the guide to her permanent and rustic life, to that ideal country of green, deep lanes and high green banks, of wild flowers and oaks and elm trees, of scented limes and

mysterious murmurings in the woods at night, and the old grey walls of hall and cottage, buttressed against time and padded with moss and lichen : Dickens, to that dark moment of sudden wealth when, within a few decades, her cities, losing all proportion to the landscape out of which they had grown, had swollen to elephantine and meaningless dimensions, having as many people as in former ages had composed entire nations, while the smoke of her chimneys blackened the sky above her, and all her streams were sullied with the filth of her factories. And this, even if it be not as pleasant, is a very real side of England ; and one that seems, withal, as if it may wholly destroy our older and more traditional life with its entangling apparatus of road, railway, and bungalow.

What lesson, you may ask me finally, can be drawn from Dickens, what are the lines of future development along which fiction can proceed ? . . . It may be that there are only two, until in the course of time another one discloses itself. The old novel, the novel of the nineteenth century, is finished, a closed book : to renew life and interest in this art-form, it is necessary to do something fresh, and this freshness, applying scientific principles to the life of today, we can discover in

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two things. These two principles I shall call cinematographic and microscopic.

We must take advantage of the increased rapidity of the human mind, which has been forced to adapt itself to a mechanical age ; we must enable the reader to journey at sixty or a hundred or three hundred miles an hour, rather than at the walking pace of the Victorian writer. There are two ways of achieving this end : one of slowing down, of examining minutely, and so reaching conclusions to which before it was not possible to attain ; the other of travelling so fast that again one is enabled to arrive at conclusions hitherto unattainable ; one may travel, as it were, so rapidly from London to Pekin as to be able really to contrast the two cities in one's mind, thus making use of the increased agility of the modern brain which can, nowadays, construct bridges undreamt-of long ago. In the first method we can examine life under a microscope, revealing a thousand struggles where before there had appeared to be only agreement ; thus we can show how wrong the older psychologists are in their simple acceptance of love and hatred, for every passion and every thought is composed of hundreds of contrary elements, and this may lead, as it does with Proust, to there being no hero and no villain ; just

as it has been advanced that Shakespeare intended Prospero and Caliban to be played by the same character, to be, in fact, the same man, so in life good and bad are blended and not rigidly divided. This is not to say that black is white and white black, but that they are complementary to each other.

But we must not, subject to that self-deprecating fever from which all Englishmen suffer, decry our novels in the same way in which, two hundred years ago, we decried our cathedrals, because they are full of a fervent and, what to untutored minds must seem, an untutored fancy. We must not sacrifice, for example, the tradition of Dickens, a national genius of the first order, on the altar of some more logical, though perhaps equally great novelist such as Flaubert. We can learn, too, from the way in which the novels of Dickens came into being : it is known that they grew themselves. He had a general idea, and then, as he wrote, the plant grew up beneath his hand ; and this, indeed, is an instance of what I mean when I say that all great novelists must conceive their novels as poems : empty shells, but shells that are still to be filled with life and movement.

The first necessity of the novel—which is art—

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is that it should conform to the rules that govern every other art-form : it must be considered as an entity, not a thing to be chopped up and changed : it must be dreamt more than thought out : it must well up from the sub-conscious mind into the conscious, not be forced down : it must, in fact, as I have just said, be a poem, an empty poem, as it were ; a shape to be filled at the imperious discretion of the artist. Within the boundaries thus enclosed the English artist is allowed any amount of scope, movement, and space. Within those limits he may do whatever he likes : for the Gothic Englishman, by his nature, must be free to build his pinnacles and indulge in his unnecessary, but picturesque, flying buttresses.



*Some Aspects of National Genius*

THREE ERAS OF MODERN POETRY

FIRST LECTURE

*Edith Sitwell*

My grateful thanks are due to  
Messrs. Gerald Duckworth for  
their permission to make use of  
copious quotations from my book  
Aspects of Modern Poetry.

EDITH SITWELL

# THREE ERAS OF MODERN POETRY

## I

*Mr. Chairman, Ladies, and Gentlemen*

THE TEXT FOR MY SERMONS of today and Thursday will be found in one of those published exhortations of Mr. Barrett, of Footshape Works, Northampton, with which our daily papers are from time to time enlivened.

Mr. Barrett tells us that "a gentleman said to me the other day : 'Mr. Barrett, it was not until I read one of your little sermons on how to walk the Barrett way that I realized that it was not I who came home tired at night. It was my feet.' "

I wish that the poets of the youngest generation,—not by any means all,—but many of them,—could be induced to learn this little sermon of Mr.

Barrett's by heart. The only difference between the gentleman who confided in Mr. Barrett and these young men is that they don't realize what it is that makes them come in tired. Nor do they ever realize that they *do* come in tired. The same must be said of most of the poets of the 1880's and 1890's.

Before we go further, I should like to make one thing clear about both these lectures. I have selected certain poets for analysis, not because they are necessarily more important than other poets, but because they illustrate certain tendencies more insistently.

In order that we may understand where certain poets of today go wrong, and, also, their virtues, let us examine the influences in the poets of the past by which they have been formed.

In the middle and in the second half of last century, three men were writing poems which were to influence, indeed to *form*, the youngest generation of our poets. These three men were Gerard Manley Hopkins, Robert Browning, and Walt Whitman.

The first, Hopkins, was to influence technique alone, but that influence has been enormous,—and all to the bad. For this we must not blame him, however, but the young persons who believe themselves to be descended from him technically, and

### *Three Eras of Modern Poetry—I*

who *cannot* understand that it is useless to try to form a technique from outside. Nor was the technique of Hopkins new. It is unnecessary to go into the ancestry and history of sprung rhythm ; enough has been written and said about that, but the poetry of Hopkins bears a certain family likeness to that of Crashaw ; though Crashaw's poetry cannot be compared with Hopkins' from the point of view of force and sweep. Hopkins, in a letter dated 1879, said that some lines of his poem *The Eurydice* "struck me aghast with a kind of raw nakedness and unmitigated violence I was unprepared for ; but take breath and read it with the ears, as I always wish to read, and my verse becomes all right."

It is exactly in this raw nakedness and unmitigated violence, in a sort of leonine majesty, that Hopkins' greatness, and—with a different temper—Whitman's greatness, is shown.

There is, alas, not this leonine majesty, this vigour, and rush, and speed, in those of the younger men who believe themselves to be their descendants.

The technical newness of Whitman is rather deceptive. We have met these rhythms before in the Bible. But the public was not expecting them in this later writer, and he was therefore, naturally, nearly torn to bits because of this supposed technical

newness, because of what the people believed to be the formlessness of his verse. Actually that apparent formlessness covers tides and pulses like those of the sea. His newness, in reality, is one of *impulse*. Never before, to my knowledge, had the glory of the common day, of toil, of the common actions of life and their splendour, been the convinced subjects of verse.

Now to take Browning. The verse of this poet *appeared* new because he was the first poet of any importance, with the exception of Wordsworth, to make character, and the events arising out of a character, the subject of a *lyric*. (I said *lyric*,—I am not speaking of other forms of verse.) Before Wordsworth and Browning, either emotions, or time, or night, or the meeting between lovers, or such external objects as a skylark or a nightingale or a rose,—these had been the subjects for lyrics. With Browning, and with Wordsworth, all had been changed.

It is unnecessary to remind the present audience that there were other great poets who were contemporary with Hopkins, Whitman, and Browning. I do not speak of them, because their poetry has not influenced the present generation. But they are none the less great for that.

## *Three Eras of Modern Poetry—I*

I said in my book *Aspects of Modern Poetry* that “a period of lifelessness often succeeds a great age in poetry ; but even in the great Victorian age we find an undergrowth of extreme debility, of excessively bad minor poetry which took a pride in debility of expression.” The latter part of the *Oxford Book of English Verse* is a perfectly awful affair.

The mania for dilettantism which has nearly succeeded in ruining the poetry of today, began with the Victorians, and took shape—(if you can call it shape)—in placid understatement of some personal experience, expressed either in threadbare texture, or in one of an unpleasant muddy thickness.

It was also in the Victorian age that the desire first arose among poets to fit in practically with ordinary everyday occasions,—not to transmute these as Wordsworth, Whitman, and Browning did,—but to produce photographs of them. And *not* coloured photographs, either. There was a frightened rush to conform to the point of view of the man in the street, to provide a simple dress for his simple thoughts, with simple gloves to protect his hands from the touch of raw life.

At this time, too, began the “Oh, là ! là ! Maasoar” school of verse, the perpetrators of which imagine that any mention of any foreign

name, any insertion of a sentence or half-sentence of a French phrase must throw the reader into a frenzy of excitement.

The worst offender of this kind was Austin Dobson, whose whole art is more that of the old-fashioned hairdresser than that of the poet, with the copious use of what I describe as brilliantine, of triolets and other French modes resembling Marcel waves, and ringlets.

As an example of the "Oh, là ! là ! Moosoor" school let us take these lines from a poem by Mr. Dobson, called *Good-Night, Babette!*, in which the characters are an aged dodderer called Monsieur Vieuxbois—(he would be)—and a servant-girl suffering from infantilism and named Babette. The poem is written in the form of a conversation :

MONSIEUR VIEUXBOIS (*turning querulously*) :

Day of my life : Where *can* she get ?

Babette ! I say ! Babette !—Babette !

BABETTE (*entering hurriedly*) :

Coming, M'sieu ! If M'sieu speaks

So loud he won't be well for weeks.

MONSIEUR VIEUXBOIS :

Where have you been ?

BABETTE :

Why, M'sieu knows—

April ! . . . Ville d'Avray . . . Ma'am'selle Rose !

## *Three Eras of Modern Poetry—I*

MONSIEUR VIEUXBOIS :

Ah, I am old,—and I forget.

Was the place growing green, Babette?

BABETTE :

But of a greenness! Yes, M'sieu!

And then the sky so blue!—so blue!

And when I dropped my *immortelle*,

How the birds sang!

(*lifting her apron to her eyes*)

This poor Ma'am'selle!

Etc. etc. etc.

This gave me a severe shock. Until I read it, I had believed that I could find an adjective for anything. I have not found the right adjective for that poem yet.

The public sought refuge from this kind of thing in those Sousa marches, the bursting and bumping and bumptiousness of Kipling and of Henley, and the tasteful amateurishness of Robert Louis Stevenson and Alice Meynell. But another school of poets was, also, writing at this time, and of this school Dowson was infinitely the best. The rest produced verse that was for the most part flat and thin, or shallow or shadowless. The poets of that time were determined to create a poetry. Their poetry never grew, it was formed deliberately, if aimlessly, by their nerveless and numb fingers.

Yet against this background of the poetry of the 'nineties, one really great poet,—the greatest of those who are yet with us,—Mr. W. B. Yeats,—a second poet, Thomas Hardy, less great, but still admirable in his knotted, gnarled, harsh style,—and a third, who has been held by many people (I am not among them) to be of importance, A. E. Housman—arose. Hardy is the eldest of these in point of view of age.

I will speak first of Housman and Hardy. I am not among Housman's admirers, although I respect his integrity. *A Shropshire Lad* has been acclaimed by some people as great poetry because of the bareness of its line, because of its utter lack of decoration. But I feel that this bareness is due largely to a lack of vitality. Images do not spring from Housman's mind. I feel that there is no possibility of floriation or burgeoning, that no splendid spring or summer could spring from his earth. And that is the difference between his verse and that of Hardy. Hardy's poems are gnarled and rough and bare like winter boughs ; but you feel that from those boughs life will spring. And authentic poetry has always this feeling that new wonders lie below the surface, that spring is hidden in the boughs of winter. Housman's poems are often smooth—(excepting for rheumatic joints and swellings)—but

### *Three Eras of Modern Poetry—I*

their smoothness comes from a lack of muscle. This admired simplicity of his seems not so much the result of passion finding its expression in an inevitable phrase, inhabiting it as the soul inhabits the body, as the result of a bare and threadbare texture. And the texture is not strong enough to contain an explosive force, or the possibility of a passionate upheaval under the line. When the structure is rigid, it is not the rigidity of grief ; it seems to arise from stiffness, from an insufficient fluidity. The verse is, for the most part, rhythmically dead.

Again, in most of Housman's poems, the place in which the stanzas are put might easily be transferred, and it would make little or no difference to the poem,—to passion and to meaning. And this shows that the form is not the result of a living force. I am unable to understand why Housman's technique should have been so much admired by some people. It is not actually incompetent, but it rarely bears the slightest relation to the subject. *A Shropshire Lad* is written either in lines which end with a violent and perfectly meaningless pause :

Leave your home behind, lad,  
And reach your friends your hand,  
And go, and luck go with you  
While Ludlow tower shall stand,

or in a movement reminiscent of *Hymns Ancient and Modern* :

Wake ; the silver dusk returning  
Up the beach of darkness brims,  
And the ship of sunrise burning  
Strands upon the eastern rims,

or in a monotonous swinging quatrain with a six-syllable norm and an open-shut, open-shut rhyme scheme, or in a huddled eight-syllable line quatrain, rhymed A-A-B-B, where lines with no proper speech-pause are followed by a clump of lines with violent herring-boned pauses up the middle. By herring-boned I mean pauses that occur in exactly the same place in the line.

Now, to speak for a moment of eight-syllable quatrains : with such a poet as Mr. Eliot, who has the muscles of a jaguar, the resemblance of one type of eight-syllable quatrain and another is as rudimentary as the resemblance of every kind of man with every other kind of man and with each kind of ape. The eight-syllable norm is capable of great variety, due to the varying strength of consonants, the broadening or deepening or lengthening of the line brought about by the vowel scheme. But Housman has not this technical genius. His texture, as I have said, is insufficient for his needs.

## Three Eras of Modern Poetry—I

Let us compare a few lines from some of Housman's quatrains with an eight-syllable norm, with some eight-syllable quatrains of Mr. Eliot's. The themes of the two poems are not unlike.

We will take Mr. Eliot's first ; the lines I am about to quote are from *Whispers of Immortality* :

Donne, I suppose, was such another  
Who found no substitute for sense,  
To seize and clutch and penetrate ;  
Expert beyond experience,

He knew the anguish of the marrow  
The ague of the skeleton ;  
No contact possible to flesh  
Allayed the fever of the bone.

It is a strange fact that the open-shut, open-shut rhyme scheme has been one of the major curses of modern poetry. It should never be used by any poet, whose muscles do not act flawlessly as Mr. Eliot's. With other, and lesser, poets it is an excuse for laziness and shoddiness. But with Mr. Eliot, it has an appalling impressiveness ; a little freezing air creeps through the gap in those unrhymed lines. These quatrains, bare as the immortal skeleton, are, like Housman's, based on the eight-syllable norm ; but Mr. Eliot's have the strength of the bones that are no longer held together even by the cold. They

*Trio*

have the undying passion that has known all experience and has learnt that all is vain.

Of this great poem I shall speak later, when I come to examine Mr. Eliot's work in detail. But if we compare those eight-syllabled lines with the following by Housman, we shall see where Mr. Housman fails :

When I meet the morning beam,  
Or lay me down at night to dream,  
I hear my bones within me say,  
"Another night, another day.

"When shall this slough of sense be cast,  
This dust of thoughts be laid at last,  
The man of flesh and soul be slain  
And the man of bone remain?"

The feeling of that is all right as far as it goes, but the movement is definitely all wrong. First of all, in the first quatrain, it tries to trip along in a cheerful if huddled manner, which has nothing to do with the meaning of the poem, and then in the second half of the quatrain it is herring-boned. Housman's caesuras are not a natural speech-pause, but are more in the nature of a crack or fissure in the fabric of the work. We must not, however, be unfair. *Is My Team Ploughing* is an admirable poem, and so is *The True Lover*.

## *Three Eras of Modern Poetry—I*

Housman is not a great poet, but his poems are the simple and manly utterances of a simple and manly man.

And now we come to Hardy.

I said earlier in the lecture that the main difference between Housman and Hardy is that with Housman there is no possibility of floriation springing from his bareness, whereas with Hardy, you feel that from his gnarled winter boughs life may spring. But though this possibility of floriation has its advantages, it has also its dangers, and Hardy, perhaps from his habits as a novelist, is inclined, in his less great poems, to wander from the point, to bring in side-issues. In consequence, Hardy has not always the same sense of *direction* as Housman, who certainly possesses that quality, and is undivertible. On the other hand, Hardy, when he is not diffused, and *has* direction, has an infinitely greater emotional power, as we shall see from this poem, one of his best :

### A TRAMPWOMAN'S TRAGEDY

From Wynyard's Gap the livelong day,  
The livelong day,  
We beat afoot the northward way  
We had travelled times before.

*Trio*

The sun-blaze burning on our backs,  
Our shoulders sticking to our packs,  
By fosseway, fields, and turnpike tracks  
We skirted sad Sedge-Moor.

Full twenty miles we jaunted on,  
We jaunted on,—  
My fancy-man, and jeering John,  
And Mother Lee, and I.  
And, as the sun drew down to west,  
We climbed the toilsome Poldon crest,  
And saw, of landskip sights the best,  
The inn that beamed thereby.

For months we had padded side by side,  
Ay, side by side  
Through the Great Forest, Blackmoor wide,  
And where the Parret ran.  
We'd faced the gusts on Mendip ridge,  
Had crossed the Yeo unhelped by bridge,  
Been stung by every Marshwood midge,  
I and my fancy-man.

Lone inns we loved, my man and I,  
My man and I ;  
“ King's Stag,” “ Windwhistle ” high and dry,  
“ The Horse ” on Hintock Green,  
The cosy house at Wynyard's Gap,  
“ The Hut,” renowned on Bredy Knap,  
And many another wayside tap  
Where folk might sit unseen.

*Three Eras of Modern Poetry—I*

Now as we trudged—O deadly day,  
    O deadly day!—

I teased my fancy-man in play  
    And wanton idleness.

I walked alongside jeering John,  
I laid his hand my waist upon;  
I would not bend my glances on  
    My lover's dark distress.

Thus Poldon top at last we won,  
    At last we won,  
And gained the inn at sink of sun  
    Far-famed as “ Marshal's Elm.”  
Beneath us figured tor and lea,  
From Mendip to the western sea—  
I doubt if finer sight there be  
    Within this royal realm.

Inside the settle all a-row—  
    All four a-row  
We sat, I next to John, to show  
    That he had wooed and won.  
And then he took me on his knee,  
And swore it was his turn to be  
My favoured mate, and Mother Lee  
    Passed to my former one.

Then in a voice I had never heard,  
    I had never heard,  
My only Love to me: “ One word,  
    My lady, if you please!

*Trio*

Whose is the child you are like to bear?—  
*His?* After all my months o' care?"  
God knows 'twas not! But, O despair!  
I nodded—still to tease.

Then up he sprang, and with his knife—  
And with his knife  
He let out jeering Johnny's life,  
Yes; there, at set of sun.  
The slant ray through the window nigh  
Gilded John's blood and glazing eye,  
Ere scarcely Mother Lee and I  
Knew that the deed was done.

The taverns tell the gloomy tale,  
The gloomy tale,  
How that at Ivel-chester jail  
My Love, my sweetheart swung;  
Though stained till now by no misdeed  
Save one horse ta'en in time o' need;  
(Blue Jimmy stole right many a steed  
Ere his last fling he flung).

Thereaft I walked the world alone,  
Alone, alone!  
On his death-day I gave my groan  
And dropt his dead-born child.  
'Twas nigh the jail, beneath a tree,  
None tending me; for Mother Lee  
Had died at Glaston, leaving me  
Unfriended on the wild.

### *Three Eras of Modern Poetry—I*

And in the night as I lay weak,  
    As I lay weak,  
The leaves a-falling on my cheek,  
    The red moon low declined—  
The ghost of him I'd die to kiss  
Rose up and said: "Ah, tell me this!  
Was the child mine, or was it his?  
    Speak, that I rest may find!"

O doubt not but I told him then,  
    I told him then,  
That I had kept me from all men  
    Since we joined lips and swore.  
Whereat he smiled, and thinned away  
As the wind stirred to call up day . . .  
—'Tis past! And here alone I stray  
    Haunting the Western Moor.

This great, and, I think, faultless poem, is worthy of the author of *Jude the Obscure* and *Tess*. The despair and weariness shown by the repetition (and these are always difficult to manage, can lead to disaster as we shall see when we come to Rupert Brooke), the slow and hopeless movement, all these qualities add to the greatness of the poem. I do not know a more magnificent poem in its own style. It is nearly as great as *Edward*. Hardy alternates between this greatness and the badness of such a poem as *The Flirt's Tragedy*,—where we

find hopeless diffuseness and a certain technical incapacity.

How different are these poems in every particular from those of that younger poet who was, in a sense, his contemporary, Mr. W. B. Yeats.

In the strangely beautiful and proud poems of this great poet—poems where, as I have said elsewhere, the whole of life, all experience, all wisdom is compressed into the image of a beggar, or of a tree,—and in which a black stone can hold all the secrets of the heart,—a cold wind blows from the shores of eternity.

The beings of whom Mr. Yeats writes, though they bear names we know, and though we might call to them with our mortal voices, exist in eternity and not in time, their age is not the age of dust alone.

With Mr. Yeats, poetry meant no escape from life ; poetry was life—it was action as much as dream—and dream was a part of life, a refreshment, and a reflowering. He believed in the unity of all lives.

His poems have had always the strangeness, the identity, of great poetry, as we shall see from the following poem, *He hears the Cry of the Sedge*, from the earliest book of all, *The Wind in the Reeds* :

### *Three Eras of Modern Poetry—I*

I wander by the edge  
Of this desolate lake  
Where wind cries in the sedge :  
Until the axle break  
That keeps the stars in their round,  
And hands hurl in the deep  
The banners of East and West,  
And the girdle of light is unbound,  
Your breast will not lie by the breast  
Of your beloved in sleep.

A strange coldness and desolation is produced, in this lovely poem, by the sudden shifting of the accents and by the fluctuations in the strength or breadth of these—is caused, too, by the fact that the second line seems shrunken owing to the long cold “a” of “lake,” coming after the dim short vowels. The eighth and ninth lines are suddenly blown outwards, as if by a wind, but the tenth dies away again slowly into a long stretch of silence.

The strange, cold, faery-like air which haunts this poem is produced, also, by the change of speed between the one-syllabled, two-syllabled, and three-syllabled words, and by the fact that in some of the two-syllabled words the second syllable dies or sinks or withers into silence, whereas in “unbound” each syllable is a long stretch of sound, and in “wonder” the first

*Trio*

syllable is dark, dim, and long, and the second dies away, but slowly.

From time to time, also, a strange echo sighs within the lines, as here :

I wander by the edge  
Of this desolate lake  
Where wind *cries* in the sedge,

and here :

That keeps the stars in their round,  
And hands hurl in the deep  
The banners of East and West,  
And the girdle of light is unbound,  
Your breast will not lie by the breast  
Of your beloved in sleep.

.. . . . .

How deep is the wisdom of this poem, and how intense and strange its identity :

THE THREE HERMITS

Three old hermits took the air  
By a cold and desolate sea,  
First was muttering a prayer,  
Second rummaged for a flea ;

### *Three Eras of Modern Poetry—I*

On a windy stone, the third,  
Giddy with his hundredth year,  
Sang unnoticed like a bird :  
“ Though the Door of Death is near  
And what waits behind the door,  
Three times in a single day  
I, though upright on the shore,  
Fall asleep when I should pray.”  
So the first, but now the second :  
“ We’re but given what we have earned  
When all thoughts and deeds are reckoned,  
So it’s plain to be discerned  
That the shades of holy men  
Who have failed, being weak of will,  
Pass the Door of Birth again ;  
And are plagued by crowds, until  
They’ve the passion to escape.”  
Moaned the other, “ They are thrown  
Into some most fearful shape.”  
But the second mocked his moan :  
“ They are not changed to anything,  
Having loved God once, but maybe  
To a poet or a king  
Or a witty lovely lady.”  
While he’d rummaged rags and hair,  
Caught and cracked his flea, the third,  
Giddy with his hundredth year,  
Sang unnoticed like a bird.

The strange beauty of this poem does not lie

*Trio*

alone in the knowledge that it is sung on the shore  
of eternity—

By a cold and desolate sea . . .

The beggar who

rummaged rags and hair,

Caught and cracked his flea

has turned away, sorted and summed up all the rem-  
nants of mortality and has found life—in one form.

The praying beggar fears the approaching sleep; but  
beside them is the strange saint-like ecstasy of one  
who :

Giddy with his hundredth year,

Sang unnoticed like a bird—

and who, like a bird, trusts in the love of God.

Here, indeed, this great poet whose life as an artist began under the influence of writers like Pater and Villiers de l'Isle Adam, has removed himself from any trace of those influences. His rhythmic line is bare almost to austerity, but has all the nobility that such a barenness of outline can give: The mood of these poems, their particular lyrical impetus, has changed from that of the lovely earlier verses ; that impetus is perhaps sharper, and darker, but in the later as in the early poems the lovely sound and sense are fused into one as in no other lyrical poetry of our time.

\* The strange wisdom that is radiant round such a

### *Three Eras of Modern Poetry—I*

poem as *Mohini Chaterjee*, for instance, takes another form in the poem *Crazy Jane on God*, in which the fusion of wisdom with the intensity of passion is such that we feel the poem is a fire rather than a form of words blown together :

That lover of a night  
Came when he would,  
Went in the dawning light  
Whether I would or no ;  
Men come, men go ;  
*All things remain in God.*

Banners choke the sky ;  
Men-at-arms tread ;  
Armoured horses neigh  
Where the great battle was  
In the narrow pass ;  
*All things remain in God.*

Before their eyes a house  
That from childhood stood  
Uninhabited, ruinous,  
Suddenly lit up  
From door to top ;  
*All things remain in God.*

I had wild Jack for a lover ;  
Though like a road  
That men pass over  
My body makes no moan  
But sings on :  
*All things remain in God.*

### *Trio*

In this poem the impression of those torn rags  
of womanhood

. . . a house  
That from childhood stood  
Uninhabited, ruinous,  
Suddenly lit up . . .

is conveyed by the toneless half-rhymes that appear from time to time : "would-God" (a plunge into immeasurable depths, this) in the first verse ; "sky-neigh," "tread-God," "was-pass" in the second verse ; "house-ruinous" (the extra syllable in the second word gives a feeling of huddled misery), "stood-God," "up-top" in the third, "lover-over," "road-God," "moan-on" in the fourth. It is a memorable fact that the only pure rhymes are in the first verse (where there is still the "would-God" half-rhyme on which I have commented already) and this has much psychological significance. In the second verse, there is a mixture of rising, falling, and stretching half-rhymes, or dissonances ; in the third all are falling ; in the last verse, the half-rhymes alternately fall and stretch wildly onwards into infinity. This is only one of the deeply significant technical interests of this great poem.

Words for Music, indeed, from which the fore-

going poem was taken, are, to my feeling, undoubtedly the greatest lyrics of the last hundred years, because of their intense fusion of spirit and matter, because of their overwhelming fire and their strange world-old wisdom, sung in the voice of one who is impatient with the loveless dust.

We now come to the poets who have been called the Georgian school.—I will discuss, firstly, three poets whose work had its place in Sir Edward Marsh's *Georgian Poetry*, but whose work bears no family resemblance to the other poets in that anthology. These three poets are Walter de la Mare, William Davies, and Ralph Hodgson.

Mr. Walter de la Mare is at his best an exquisite and flawless poet. He is never on a large scale, he is passionless, but he has a peculiar charm which is a personal quality, and which is completely unlike that of any other poet I can think of. His beauty is like that of a friendly fairy, or of a child who is only half-mortal, and he is utterly original. He seems to have no parentage, although, on the other hand, he is not in the slightest revolutionary. He is at his best in quick, bright rhythms that are not hard, but have a glancing dew-sharp brightness like the glitter on leaves, like the dancing of leaves. In such a poem as *Berries*, for instance, or *Three*

*Farmers*.—*Peacock Pie* seems to me incomparably Mr. de la Mare's best book. Let us take one of the shorter poems from this, *Old Shellover*, which is flawless in shape and movement,—indeed, the shape and movement are one :

‘ Come ! ’ said Old Shellover,  
‘ What ? ’ says Creep.  
‘ The horny old Gardener’s fast asleep ;  
The fat cock Thrush  
To his nest has gone,  
And the dew shines bright  
In the rising Moon ;  
Old Sallie Worm from her hole doth peep ; ’  
‘ Come ! ’ said Old Shellover,  
‘ Ay ! ’ said Creep.

In such a poem, again, as *A Widow’s Weeds*, we have a half-strange, half-friendly emanation of poetry, a beauty that is concentrated into an image and that then emanates from the image as if it were an air.

A poor old Widow in her weeds  
Sowed her garden with wild-flower seeds ;  
Not too shallow, and not too deep,  
And down came April—drip—drip—drip.  
Up shone May, like gold, and soon  
Green as an arbour grew leafy June.  
And now all summer she sits and sews  
Where willow herb, comfrey, bugloss blows,

### *Three Eras of Modern Poetry—I*

Teasle and tansy, meadowsweet,  
Campion, toadflax, and rough hawksbit ;  
Brown bee orchis, and Peals of Bells ;  
Clover, burnet, and thyme she smells ;  
Like Oberon's meadows her garden is  
Drowsy from dawn till dusk with bees.  
Weeps she never, but sometimes sighs,  
And peeps at her garden with bright brown eyes ;  
And all she has is all she needs—  
A poor old Widow in her weeds.

It is customary to say of Mr. de la Mare that his poems are magical. And, as happens sometimes, this very obvious platitude contains the truth. This poem *is* magic, though the magic can sometimes be traced to the source, to some degree. In this case, it is partly a matter of image, and partly a matter of technique. The movement has within it the echo of that gentle, friendly rain, after which May upshone and leafy June grew green. And to me, part of the beauty lies in the fact that for some reason, not only the fields of May, but also the April rain, seems of gold.

Then we have the lines :

Like Oberon's meadows her garden is  
Drowsy from dawn till dusk with bees.  
Weeps she never, but sometimes sighs,  
And peeps at her garden with bright brown eyes.

### *Trio*

Here again, for some reason, the bees that are like those in Oberon's meadows, and the poor old widow's bright brown eyes, seem, in some strange way, relations.

Then the freshness and the clearness of the texture, the occasional alliterations, the changes from the poignancy of the rhymes and their assonances that end the first three lines, "weeds," "seeds," "deep," to the more secretive, cooler, rounder sound of "drip,"—(these sounds, and the change between them, are echoed throughout the poem)—the change from the sound of "drip" to the warmer vowel sounds of "soon"—"June"—all these add to the beauty and magic of this lovely and flawless little poem.

Nearly all Mr. de la Mare's poems have this gentle fresh radiance. I care for him less when he is in a melancholy mood, for the poems then have a tendency to become a little too lavender-scented. And he should avoid Pan at all costs. With most English poets of today, Pan is not the great rank and terrible God of Nature,—but a sort of Peter Pan. Again, his open-shut, open-shut, or shut-open, shut-open rhyme schemes are a peril in slow-moving poems, although they work admirably in quick-moving ones, such as *Berries* or *Three Jolly Farmers*.

### *Three Eras of Modern Poetry—I*

In Mr. de la Mare's slow-moving poems these schemes lead to vagueness, mistiness, or loss of direction, because they do not suit his muscles. His opens flap in the air, to no point, unlike those of Eliot, where the flapping has a deathly and terrible likeness to the meaning.

At his best, however, the friendly yet strange glamour is irresistible.

And now to come to Mr. W. H. Davies. This poet gives us the world as it is, but after it has been bathed in the radiance and the dew of a strange innocence.

The beauty of his poems is due mainly to their fresh and lovely fancy, and this is enhanced, often, by the shape, which is clear and rounded as an apple, or has the soft perfection of a bullfinch's rosy feathers. The beauty, indeed, lies more in the exquisite images—those reflections in a lake, in the roundness of the dew-clear apple—than in the texture, which often has a kind of homely and pleasing country roughness, like that of certain leaves—raspberry leaves, for instance—or of cool country sheets and of home-made bread.

Yet in such a poem as *The Kingfisher*, there is an extraordinary beauty of texture as well as of fancy and of shape :

### *Trio*

It was the Rainbow gave thee birth,  
And left thee all her lovely hues ;  
And, as her mother's name was Tears,  
So runs it in thy blood to choose  
For haunts the lonely pools, and keep  
In company with trees that weep.

Go you and, with such glorious hues,  
Live with proud Peacocks in green parks ;  
On lawns as smooth as shining glass,  
Let every feather show its marks ;  
Get thee on boughs and clap thy wings  
Before the windows of proud kings.

Nay, lovely Bird, thou art not vain ;  
Thou hast no proud, ambitious mind ;  
I also love a quiet place  
That's green, away from all mankind ;  
A lonely pool, and let a tree  
Sigh with her bosom over me.

The poignance of the vowel-sounds in the first lines gives the lovely colour of the kingfisher's feathers. The deep and changing vowels, the alliterative liquids, of

And left thee all her lovely hues,

the change from the sound of "choose" to the deeper plunging sound of "haunts," and the change from the long clear "o" in "lonely" to the

### *Three Eras of Modern Poetry—I*

assonances “choose” and “pools”; these sounds, echoing each other, or producing some clearer reflection of each other, seem like reflections in deep waters. In

I also love a quiet place  
we have a lovely secrecy, the sound of a gentle withdrawal into some green solitude, because of the shrinking vowels of “quiet” coming after the long deep “qu.”

The brightening of the sound in

Go you and, with such glorious hues  
to the sharper clearer sound of “hues,” produces  
again a reflection of the kingfisher’s lovely flashing  
colours, seen in deep water.

This amazing visual beauty and clearness, as of something that has been washed in heavenly dews, is natural to all Mr. Davies’ poetry.

A clear light and colour surrounds all these poems, and often it cannot be explained, as with these lines :

Ah, little girl with wool,  
What are you making now?  
Some stockings for a bird  
To keep his legs from snow.

The juxtaposition of the idea of the clear

### *Trio*

feathers of the bird and the white snow gives each a stranger brightness.

A deep compassion and understanding shines in such other poems as *Night Wanderers*, with the terrible quatrain :

Some of them laugh, half mad ; and some  
All through the chilly night are dumb ;  
Like poor, weak infants some converse,  
And cough like giants, deep and hoarse.

Such lines as these, so heart-piercing and so true, shame the cold heart of the world. Mr. Davies almost invariably attains to an extraordinary compression, arriving at this largely by the means of a pure outline, and also by the simplicity which is one of the great beauties of his poetry.

• • • • •  
Ralph Hodgson has a quality which is at once warm and luminous. His poems light us and warm us, but they are not, I think, fiery. They have no power to burn, nor do they soar like flames. Yet at their best,—*The Song of Honour* is a fine example,—they give much delight. It is a noble poem, although it has not quite that strange rapt quality that had poor, mad Christopher Smart's *Hymn to David*, the poem which was, I imagine, in part the inspiration of *The Song of Honour*. The two poems are identical,

### *Three Eras of Modern Poetry—I*

rhythmically. As an instance of this luminous quality of which I have spoken, listen to these lines :

The music of a lion strong  
That shakes a hill a whole night long,  
A hill as loud as he,  
The twitter of a mouse among  
Melodious greenery,  
The ruby's and the rainbow's song,  
The nightingale's—all three,  
The song of life that wells and flows  
From every leopard, lark and rose  
And everything that gleams or goes  
Lack-lustre in the sea.

And now we come to Sturge Moore, who is, at his best, a poet of much beauty. The *form* of his shorter poems is singularly perfect,—beginning and end are most happily co-ordinated, and his poems have a lovely and sweet life of their own. Listen, for instance, to this beautiful and strange poem :

#### A DUET

“ Flowers nodding gaily, scent in air,  
Flowers posied, flowers for the hair,  
Sleepy flowers, flowers bold to stare  
“ Oh, pick me some ! ”

### *Trio*

“ Shells with lip, or tooth, or bleeding gum,  
Tell-tale shells, and shells that whisper ‘ Come,’  
Shells that stammer, blush, and yet are dumb . . . ”

“ Oh, let me hear ! ”

“ Eyes so black they draw one trembling near,  
Brown eyes, caverns flooded with a tear,  
Cloudless eyes, blue eyes so windy clear . . . ”

“ Oh, look at me ! ”

“ Kisses sadly blown across the sea,  
Darkling kisses, kisses fair and free,  
Bob-a-cherry kisses ‘neath a tree . . . ”

“ Oh, give me one ! ”

Thus sang a king and queen in Babylon.

There is beauty for you. And listen to this tender, moving little poem :

### THE MOUSE IN THE BEECHES

A little brown wood-mouse  
His ample fur-cloak dons ;  
Ties too his comforter,  
Wool white as down of swans ;  
And as he left the house,  
To see his tail was there  
He turned his head ;  
Then off he sped,  
To look if beech-nuts were  
Silver or red.

### *Three Eras of Modern Poetry—I*

Certain other poems of his have a bear-like clumsiness which comes from a too great robustness crammed into too small a space ; and I do not care greatly for the longer poems, though they contain lovely lines, because I do not find them so perfectly co-ordinated in shape as the best of the shorter. But certain of his poems are excellent and lovely.

The same may be said of the shorter poems of Gordon Bottomley, who has a fine sensuality, who teaches us much of the world of the senses. There is nothing numb about his touch, in such poems as those in the *Chambers of Imagery*. Air, for him, has a thousand variations of touch, of smell, of light—and this is true, also, of W. J. Turner.

There is a remarkable difference between these lovely poets and certain of the other Georgians who seem obsessed by the predilection for sheep. Sheep became with them almost a mania,—together with singing - birds,—(these were heavily patronized) violins (only these were called fiddles), gaffers, ale-house wits, and rustic parts of England. There was a good deal of mumbling about Mamble, grumbles because the author had never visited Mamble. There were loud and cheerful if raucous cries for

### *Trio*

beer, and raptures over cricket. Nor have all these poets, by any means, learned to walk the Barrett way. About two years ago, I read, in a short story, a fragment of a poem which was quoted thus :

. . . This was the man I saw :

He had been in England as long as dove and daw,  
Calling the wild cherry tree the merry tree ;  
The rose campion Bridget-in-her-bravery.

I did not know this fragment, and the bird-like twist of the sprung rhythm, for thus it seemed, *when quoted*, was, to my ears, perfection, not only in the sound itself, but also in the exact relation between sound and sense.

¶ I hunted high and low, and woe is me, at last I found it. Edward Thomas was the author, and Edward Thomas had certainly never learnt to walk the Barrett way. *His* feet came in tired at night, all right. *This* is how the fragment actually ran, with the lines immediately preceding it and succeeding it :

He is English as this gate, these flowers, this mire.  
And when at eight years old Lob-lie-by-the-fire  
Came in my books, this was the man I saw.  
He had been in England as long as dove and daw,  
Calling the wild cherry tree the merry tree,  
The rose campion Bridget-in-her-bravery ;

### *Three Eras of Modern Poetry—I*

And in a tender mood, he, as I guess,  
Christened the flower de luce, Love-in-idleness,  
And while he walked from Exeter to Leeds  
One April called all cuckoo flowers milk-maids.

Here we have a fine warning of what would have happened if Cleopatra's nose had been half an inch too long.

Among these infelicities, the stone-like strength and the truth of the tragedies Wilfrid Wilson Gibson related stand out in striking contrast. So do the dramatic poems of the present Poet Laureate, Mr. Masefield, though his rhythms are unsubtle. It may be said, of course, that they are deliberately unsubtle, that the poems are country ballads, put to a rough country rhythm. The trouble about the rhythm, to my mind, is that it is too loose, it lolllops. But at their best, the poems are definitely moving. Mr. Masefield's smoother, more sophisticated work is rarely, if ever, successful.

Of the less violent of the Georgian poets, Edmund Blunden is the best. He has a fine ear, and I would especially commend that lovely little poem *The Old Almswomen*.

The poetry of Rupert Brooke seems, for the moment, to be undergoing the eclipse that in-

inevitably follows a change of fashion in verse. But I don't know, really, that he is much worse than most of the younger poets who are writing today. He seems to me to be a cross between them and Laurence Hope. He has the same familiar human touch as the younger poets at their worst, but he is, of course, better than Laurence Hope, and has not sunk to quite her depths of unreality. He has never, I imagine, appealed greatly to those readers with whom poetry is a part of their blood, but he will no doubt always be held in affection by a certain kind of reader, the kind who has always *wished* to feel emotion, and who wants to be told that his whipped-up, not quite real, emotions *are* real. He has one great quality ; his verses undoubtedly spring from the page and shine in springing, and this cannot be said of most of the lesser Georgian poets. Brooke's poems have a shimmering, mercurial quality about them, but they have, at the same time, a faintly spurious flavour,—though it is a flavour which is definite, however much we may dislike it, whilst most of the lesser Georgians show an utter lack of any definite quality. They lie flat on the page, and are painfully unobtrusive. This spurious quality of Brooke's, however, I find *common*. I do not mean general

### *Three Eras of Modern Poetry—I*

to mankind. I mean vulgar. Because a pretended emotion is vulgar. Take the following,—*Dust*—which is among his best-known poems :

When the white flame in us is gone  
And we that lost the world's delight  
Stiffen in darkness, left alone  
To crumble in our separate night ;

When your swift hair is quiet in death,  
And through the lips corruption thrust  
Has stilled the labour of my breath—  
When we are dust, when we are dust !—

Not dead, not undesirous yet,  
Still sentient, still unsatisfied,  
We'll ride the air, and shine, and flit,  
Around the places where we died,

And dance as dust before the sun,  
And light of foot, and unconfined,  
Hurry from road to road, and run  
About the errands of the wind.

And every mote, on earth or air,  
Will speed and gleam, down later day,  
And like a secret pilgrim fare  
By eager and invisible ways,

Nor ever rest, nor ever lie,  
Till, beyond thinking, out of view,  
One mote of all the dust that's I  
Shall meet one atom that was you.

### *Trio*

Then in some garden hushed from wind,  
Warm in a sunset's afterglow,  
The lovers in the flowers will find  
A sweet and strange unquiet grow

Upon the peace ; and, past desiring,  
So high a beauty in the air,  
And such a light, and such a quiring,  
And such a radiant ecstasy there,

They'll know not if it's fire, or dew,  
Or out of earth, or in the height,  
Singing, or flame, or scent, or hue,  
Or two that pass, in light, to light,

Out of the garden, higher, higher . . .  
But in that instant they shall learn  
The shattering ecstasy of our fire,  
And the weak passionless hearts will burn

And faint in that amazing glow,  
Until the darkness close above ;  
And they will know—poor fools, they'll know !—  
One moment, what it is to love.

No doubt that his admirers, dazzled by the mere  
mention of "radiant ecstasy,"—and by the lines :

They'll know not if it's fire, or dew,  
Or out of earth, or in the height,  
Singing, or flame, or scent, or hue,  
Or two that pass, in light, to light,

### *Three Eras of Modern Poetry—I*

will believe that here is another Shelley, who died before his time. Here, they will say, is Shelley's high intangible glamour falling from the air. It is nothing of the kind. The first two quatrains have been done over and over again, but far better. And it is all very unfelt. Why, for instance, should the lady's hair be swift? What on earth does that mean? The poem has awful faults. I know few verses more embarrassing than the following :

Then in some garden hushed from wind,  
Warm in a sunset's afterglow,  
The lovers in the flowers will find  
A sweet and strange unquiet grow.

This, by some magic, transports us immediately to a picture by Marcus Stone or Maud Goodman.

Again, Brooke's sonnets are pretty bad. But then, it is my feeling that since, say, Wordsworth and Keats there have been no sonnets of any real worth in the English language. The French, on the other hand, have produced at least two supreme sonnets, Gerard de Nerval's *El Desdichado*, and Mallarmé's *Tristesse d'Été*. It is my belief that were sonnets of any worth to be written in English or in French, they would have this nostalgic strangeness, would not have the robustness of Words-

### Trio

worth's sonnets, which, though admirably strong, are a little dull.

But to return to Brooke. Such poems as *Grantchester* and *Dining-Room Tea* seem to me to have more the atmosphere in which a novel lives, than that in which a poem lives. But in novels we expect psychology, and there is none here.

James Elroy Flecker's early poems have the same slightly hysterical exuberant vulgarity and whipped-up emotions as have Brooke's, and he has the same missish mannerisms :

O pool in which we dallied  
And splashed the prostrate Noon !  
O Water-boy, more pallid  
Than any watery moon !  
O Lilies round him turning !  
O broken Lilies strewn !  
O silver Lutes of Morning !  
O Red of the Drums of Noon !

Yet ~~he~~ has written good poetry. *The Old Ships*, for instance ; and *The Golden Gates of Damascus*, which has some splendid lines :

The dragon-green, the luminous, the dark, the  
serpent-haunted sea,  
The snow-besprinkled wine of earth, the white and  
blue flower-foaming sea.

### *Three Eras of Modern Poetry—I*

There is a tendency to indulge in too much Turkish Delight, but here, at least, he has got away from the truncated lines that were his bane.

In this lecture, we have seen two eras of poetry, in the next, we shall come to a third.



*Some Aspects of National Genius*

THREE ERAS OF MODERN POETRY  
SECOND LECTURE

*Edith Sitwell*



# THREE ERAS OF MODERN POETRY

## II

THE WAR YEARS PRODUCED, in poetry, much that was fine,—the poems of Isaac Rosenberg, the fiery indignation, shaped with strength and care, of Siegfried Sassoon. They produced Wilfred Owen, who, had he lived, would have been one of the greatest poets of our time. He was killed seven days before the Armistice, at the age of twenty-five, and to this day I can hardly bring myself to speak of our loss. The mournful magnificence of his line, his dark and tragic fire, his absolute control over his medium, his device of conveying an unutterable weariness and despair by ending the lines with dropping dissonances instead of with

rhymes,—all these place him in the front rank of poets. I can speak with certainty of the care and patience with which he worked, since it was I who prepared his first book of poems for publication. The poems were left in my care by my friend Mr. Siegfried Sassoon, who had to go to America and who eventually edited them, and it was I who disentangled, from the highly complicated drafts, the words which I believed Owen wished used. Sometimes there were as many as six alternative words in these drafts. The following poem is one of the most high and noble tragedies that swept their slow and magnificent way along amidst the horror and the filth of war. It is called *Strange Meeting*, and is the short draft of the long poem which bears that name, and which describes two soldiers of enemy camps, the killer and the killed, meeting after death. It was written a week before Owen was killed.

Earth's wheels run oiled with blood, Forget we that.  
Let us lie down and dig ourselves in thought.  
Beauty is yours and you have mastery,  
Wisdom is mine, and I have mystery.  
We two will stay behind and keep our troth.  
Let us forgo men's minds that are brute's natures,  
Let us not sup the blood which some say nurtures,

## *Three Eras of Modern Poetry—II*

Be we not swift with swiftness of the tigress.  
Let us break ranks from those who trek from progress.  
Miss we the march of this retreating world  
Into old citadels that are not walled.  
Let us lie out and hold the open truth.  
Then when their blood hath clogged the chariot wheels  
We will go up and wash them from sweet wells.  
What though we sink from men as pitchers falling :  
Many shall raise us up to be their filling :  
Even from wells we sunk too deep for war  
And filled by brows that bled where no wounds were.

Wilfred Owen was not the only great poet who arose at that time. In 1917, with the publication of Mr. T. S. Eliot's first volume *Pruferock*, began a new era in poetry. These early poems came as a shock to persons clamouring for a cul-de-sac in the guise of tradition, but to informed traditionalists they should have presented no difficulty, since they are a logical development of methods used by Robert Browning and by Jules Laforgue. In Mr. Eliot's slightly later work, too, the influence of the Elizabethan dramatists could be seen. Yet in none of these earlier or later poems can we find anything stale, or seen through the eyes of another man. All is new and vital, and the muscular system of the verse arises from that of the poet, and is inherent in the needs of the poem. Mr. Eliot's poetry is a

kind of ethereal body of the poet, as all great poetry must be.

In the earlier poems, we find an appalling and terrifying laughter, apt, at times, to change to that we may know where

. . . breastless creatures under ground  
Leaned backward with a lipless grin.

This laughter is heard in all the poems of this period, excepting in *Gerontion*; and at moments it masquerades as a human amusement. In *Sweeney Erect*, however, we have the “lipless grin” alone, and a sound as of some laughter heard in Hell. In this appalling vision of a brothel on the shores of Hell, we have, for a breath of Heaven, only the half-mocking cry :

Display me Aeolus above  
Reviewing the insurgent gales  
Which tangle Ariadne’s hair  
And swell with haste the perjured sails,

but in the companion poem to this, *Sweeney among the Nightingales*, amidst the spiritual and physical horror of the company, where man is part braying beast, part worm, part ape, or where man is but the worm turned vertebrate :

## *Three Eras of Modern Poetry—II*

Apeneck Sweeney spreads his knees (<sup>hiss</sup>)  
Letting his arms hang down to laugh,  
The zebra stripes along his jaw  
Swelling to maculate giraffe.

• • • • •  
The silent vertebrate in brown  
Contracts and concentrates, withdraws ;  
Rachel *née* Rabinovitch  
Tears at the grapes with murderous paws

—in the midst of Hell, we find this despairing beauty :

The host with someone indistinct  
Converses at the door apart,  
The nightingales are singing near  
The Convent of the Sacred Heart,

And sang within the bloody wood  
When Agamemnon cried aloud,  
And let their liquid siftings fall  
To stain the stiff dishonoured shroud.

We may remark on the inspiration and genius that, in

Apeneck Sweeney spreads his knees  
Letting his arms hang down to laugh,

uses, in the first line, minute sharp pin-points of vowels—like the beginning of a pin-point of brain—and, in the next, produces a gross sagging

*Trio*

sensuality by means of the contrasted dark heavy vowels.

In this poem, the whole spiritual state of the characters is conveyed by the actual sound of the first verse :

Apeneck Sweeney spreads his knees  
Letting his arms hang down to laugh,  
The zebra stripes along his jaw  
Swelling to maculate giraffe.

Here, after the first line, there is only hollowness, blankness, lazy abysses of emptiness, stretches of vacancy, contractions into shrunken nothingness, and, amidst this, the hoarse animal sound of the "a" in "jaw." All this is conveyed by the different wave-lengths, the heights and depths of the "a's" which run through the verse.

We meet Sweeney again, after a century of material experience compressed into the mechanism of thirteen years or so, in the sequence of two poems : *Sweeney Agonistes*. But here he and his passive complements have lost the flapping laziness which characterized *Sweeney Erect* and *Sweeney among the Nightingales* ; they seethe forward into an unknown future with a boneless movement, interweaving like worms intertwining. This movement continues throughout twenty pages, stopping only

## *Three Eras of Modern Poetry—II*

once, never hesitating otherwise excepting to change its gear from mood to mood, and even then never raising or lowering itself. The speed, the boneless movement merely seethes sideways or backwards.

The rhythms seem to be ordinary speech-rhythms, but the seething intertwining movements give them a world significance which no ordinary speech-rhythms would hold. Mr. Eliot has, indeed, done with a terrifying perfection exactly what all the youngest members of the new school of poetry have tried, and failed, to do. Doris, whom we have met before, speaks with a gramophone imitation of a human voice, but her “terre-à-terre” friend who bears the significant and horrible name of “Dusty” has a voice which seems actually muffled by the element of which she is a native.

In the second fragment we have the attempt of the debased rhythm of modern life to simplify itself into the sound—not arising from, but lowered from, the needs of that life—of cannibal drums.

I wish that it were possible for me to speak of all Mr. Eliot’s poems, the variety is so great, but time forbids, and I must content myself with speaking of *The Waste Land*.

The title of the poem is taken from Miss J. L.

Weston's book *From Ritual to Romance*, the subject of which is the legend of the Grail. In this book the significance of the Waste Land is to be found in "Fertility Ritual." But in Mr. Eliot's *Waste Land*—the Waste Land of our modern civilization—the old rhythms, uniting man with his brother man, uniting men with women in fruitful love, uniting mankind with the earth, these are destroyed, changed, or broken down. In the modern Waste Land the ground has, indeed, been ploughed up, but into furrows so deep that they might be graves for all mankind. The seed is scattered—nor, where it has taken root, do the waters of the spirit come to refresh it. With the Machine Age, the natural rhythms of the soil and of the seasons have been broken down; no longer have we a slow maturing of time, bringing our earth to harvest.

The difficulty of blending this heap of broken images—images of today, images left from past civilizations and cultures—was very great. Mr. Eliot, therefore, with his supreme genius for organizing a poem, has used the symbols of the Tarot Pack (which has, as we know from *Ritual to Romance*, a connection with Fertility Ritual, and is therefore peculiarly suitable for the purpose) as a means whereby he may sweep the "broken images"

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into such positions, such attitudes, that the shadows cast by these will fall into a pattern which forms a comprehensive and deeply significant whole. By this means, then, he has been able to draw together figures, symbols, and events, which would otherwise lie scattered throughout Time and Space, and has, at the same time, shown that these lie within the hand of an unescapable Destiny.

In the strange, muttering, half-alive whisper of the “clairvoyante” the whole scope of the poem is concentrated, made small for our inspection :

... Here, said she,  
Is your card, the drowned Phoenician Sailor,  
(Those are pearls that were his eyes. Look !)  
Here is Belladonna, the Lady of the Rocks,  
The lady of situations.  
Here is the man with three staves, and here the Wheel,  
And here is the one-eyed merchant, and this card,  
Which is blank, is something he carries on his back,  
Which I am forbidden to see. I do not find  
The Hanged Man. Fear death by water.  
I see crowds of people, walking round in a ring.

The way in which the caesuras are cast throughout this passage gives the impression that they are lengthening shadows ; and, perhaps for this reason, the clairvoyante’s voice seems to be that of a sleep-

walker, wandering amongst the shadows, rather than that of a sibyl amidst the desert lights of day.

The miraculous organization of the poem is shown, not only in the use of the Tarot Pack as a setting-off point, but in the way in which the themes are repeated on all the different levels of human consciousness and human experience. For instance, the beauty, the radiance, the deep and holy passion of the passage about the hyacinth girl (the hyacinth is one of the flowers associated with the sacrifice of the Slain God in *The Golden Bough*) :

“ You gave me hyacinths first a year ago ;  
They called me the hyacinth girl.”

— Yet when we came back, late, from the Hyacinth  
garden,

Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not  
Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither  
Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,  
Looking into the heart of light, the silence :

this will soon be changed to this terrible echo :

“ My nerves are bad to-night. Yes, bad. Stay with me.  
Speak to me. Why do you never speak. Speak.

What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?  
I never know what you are thinking. Think! ”

I think we are in rats' alley  
Where the dead men lost their bones.

## *Three Eras of Modern Poetry—II*

“ What is that noise ? ”

The wind under the door.

“ What is that noise now ? What is the wind doing ? ”

Nothing again nothing.

“ Do

You know nothing ? Do you see nothing ? Do you  
remember

Nothing ? ”

I remember

Those are pearls that were his eyes.

“ Are you alive, or not ? Is there nothing in your head ? ”

In this passage, the actual hunting, haunting, haunted, despairing movement of the wind rising and falling, pausing and rushing onwards, is given not only by the phrasing, the rushing sound, the sudden sinking silence of the sentences, the rising and falling of the rhythm, but also by the repetition of a word, as in

“ Speak to me. Why do you never speak. Speak.

What are you thinking of ? What thinking ? What ?  
I never know what you are thinking. Think.”

In the whole passage, the only human voice which is not part of the wind sounds in the lines

I think we are in rats' alley

Where the dead men lost their bones,

and in those two lines rhythm is dead—it is not

*Trio*

even a broken thing dragging its weight along—even the wind has lost its movement, and is scattered like those bones.

In the rest of the passage, the weft left over from the “empty shuttles of the wind” is mainly composed of two threads, “do” and “nothing,” and an echo of this floats towards us, drifting still more aimlessly, with all the life gone out of the wind, in “The Fire Sermon” :

On Margate Sands.  
I can connect  
Nothing with nothing.  
..The broken fingernails of dirty hands.  
My people humble people who expect  
Nothing !

Let us turn, now, to the following passage, which comes after the description of the crowd flowing over London Bridge :

There I saw one I knew, and stopped him, crying :

“ Stetson !  
You who were with me in the ships at Mylae !  
That corpse you planted last year in your garden,  
Has it begun to sprout ? Will it bloom this year ?  
Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed ?  
Oh keep the Dog far hence, that’s friend to men,  
Or with his nails he’ll dig it up again !  
You ! hypocrite lecteur !—mon semblable—mon frère ! ”

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This has been held to be obscure, I can't think why.

Here is Stetson, an ordinary man with an ordinary name—one of the crowd which

... flowed over London Bridge . . .

I had not thought death had undone so many.

But the great cry

“ You who were with me in the ships at Mylae ! ”

recalls to both these dead-in-life the memory of adventure and of battles amidst the great waters of the spirit.

The reason for the transition from the ships at Mylae to

That corpse you planted last year in your garden, and the reason why these should appear in this particular part of the poem are clear. The corpse is at once the slain Vegetation God and our dead self—perished, perhaps, in those far-away ships. It is also a buried memory :

(“ You gave me hyacinths first a year ago . . . ”)

and the lines

That corpse you planted last year in your garden,  
Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?  
Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?

*Trio*

pick up the theme of the lines with which the poem begins :

April is the cruellest month, breeding  
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing  
Memory and desire, stirring  
Dull roots with spring rain.

It is perhaps unnecessary to point out the terrible travesty, perversion, complete reversal of the idea of the primeval and holy fertility ritual, at the end of *A Game of Chess*, after the lines

When Lil's husband got demobbed, I said

In the very coarseness of the rhythm, in the meaningless raucous sound of the vowels, we are given the essence of these new savages, whose savagery is no longer represented by a superb muscular system. The human sacrifices of this new benightedness have not the heart torn out. Instead, their flesh is stripped away, and we can almost see the jerking of the nerves.

In the first lines of the fifth section, “the anguish of the Forty Days,” the anguish of those who have watched beside the Hooded Man—the anguish of both the unrepenting and the repenting, are fused with the barren pains of the opening lines of *The Waste Land* :

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After the torchlight red on sweaty faces  
After the frosty silence in the gardens  
After the agony in stony places  
The shouting and the crying  
Prison and palace and reverberation  
Of thunder of spring over distant mountains.

we find ourselves once again circling vainly, but this time slowly and with no life in our movements. Rhythm has sunk into a dead thing, or a thing, rather, which has lost its memory. The cry is always for "water"—that water which could not save, and the repetition of the word is, purposefully, the only pulse-beat which could hold the sound together. But by us, always, walks the Hooded Man, who has been the Slain God of Frazer's *The Golden Bough* in the beginning of men's minds, and who is at once the Slain God and Jesus Christ.

The splendour, the majesty, the fire and passion and control of the rest of the poem cannot be explained. The lines have a miraculous balance, floating upon the waves of passion, moving like flames. It is only possible to say of one detail, that

### *Trio*

anyone who has ever heard the thunder speaking in the mountains will know the accents that end this great poem.

The sounds have the actual reverberations of the sound of the thunder echoing over mountains, and the Voice of God is embodied in form.

Almost at the same time as that in which these great poems were conceived, a ridiculous movement was started in Paris,—a movement named, first Dadaist, then Sur-realist. It would not be necessary to mention this were it not that certain members of the British public and the Press, eager, as usual, to be sold any pup that comes along, took it seriously, whilst others seized upon it as a reason for belabouring my brothers and myself, believing, because they did not understand our work the first time they read it, that it was as meaningless as that of the Dadaists.

In a book of singular naïveté by Mr. David Gascoyne, the author gives the following reasons for the surrealist movement : “It is the avowed aim of the surrealist movement to reduce and finally to dispose altogether of the flagrant contradictions that exist between dream and waking life, the ‘unreal’ and the ‘real,’ the unconscious

### *Three Eras of Modern Poetry—II*

and the conscious, and thus to make of what has hitherto been regarded as the special domain of poets, the acknowledged common property of all.” Mr. Gascoyne adds, gravely, that “It should be clear to Marxists that the surrealist attitude is totally in accord with the Communist philosophy of dialectical materialism, with the insistence on the synonymity of theory and practice, and that only the imminence of proletarian revolution allows surrealism to hope that its aims will ultimately be fulfilled.”

Well, that is all right as far as it goes. It serves everybody right, and it seems clear enough. But then we get Monsieur André Breton, one of the leaders of the movement, answering the question “What is Surrealism?” in the following lucid manner :

“It is the cowl of the hotel mouse dear to Victor Brauner.”

“It is the fifth book of Magic by René Char.”

“It is the vessel of which René Crevel becomes the master, amidst the tempest, by closing his eyes.”

“It is the entrance of Salvador Dali holding the Philosopher’s Stone between two raised fingers.”

*Trio*

“It is the least caprice of Marcel Duchamp.”

“It is the sparkling of Paul Eluard’s glass.”

“It is Marx Ernst, long after the invention of silk, drawing Ariadne’s thread from the cocoon of mimetic insects.”

“It is the struggle of Albert Giacometti with the Angel of Invisibility who has made an appointment with him among the blossoming apple-trees.”

“It is George Huguet’s kiss on the mouth of the Beauty.”

“It is the vision of Valentine Hugo, pierced by the cry of Sisteron.”

“It is the cuckoo’s egg laid in the nest (whose brood is lost) with the complicity of René Maguette.”

“It is re-learning to read by means of E. L. T. Mesens’ star-alphabet.”

“It is Paul Nougé’s great mystery lesson.”

“It is the handsomeness of Benjamin Péret while listening to the words of family, religion and patriotism.”

“It is the mirror bent in Man Ray’s arms.”

“It is the appearance of Yves Tanguy, his hair done in the paradisier grande émeraude style.”

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It is the violet holding back the Cantharides  
hats of Tristram Tzara."

Quite!

Let us examine the handsomeness of Benjamin Péret while listening to words of family, religion, and patriotism.

The following poem, *Honest Folk*, has been translated by Mr. Ruthven Todd. But the fact of translation can have effected no radical change in the poem, since we have here no affair of intricate sound patterns. Indeed, there is no recognizable pattern even of the simplest kind.

The quarrel between the boiled chicken and the  
ventriloquist  
Had for us the meaning of a cloud of dust,  
Which passed above the city  
Like the blowing of a trumpet.  
It blew so loudly that its bowler hat was  
trembling,  
And its beard stood up on end  
To bite off its nose.  
It blew so loudly  
That its nose cracked open like a nut,  
And the nut spat out  
Into the far distance  
A little cow-shed

*Trio*

Wherein the youngest calf  
Was selling its mother's milk  
In sausage-skin flasks  
That its father had vulcanised.

No wonder that Mr. Gascoyne is able to announce that "On a Marxist basis Tzara (one of the leaders) examines the value of surrealist poetic activity as the foundation of the 'culture' of the new society that will be brought about by the Revolution. Surrealism provides the germ of a new mentality, a new way of knowing the world, and incessantly opposes all the old pragmatisms that are struggling to maintain not only the old order but the old order of thought, with the unchangeable 'verities' and its log-sided commonsense" as well.

We must not, however, be unfair. Paul Eluard, a member of this group, is a very fine poet.

It was at about this time that my brothers and I began to write, and the Dadaist nonsense, as I have said, was seized upon, immediately, as a rod with which to belabour us. It was decided that we were doing exactly the same thing as the Dadaists, and the fact that we were doing nothing of the kind made no difference to the attackers.

My poems in especial were singled out as Dadaist, and this was, I imagine, because I was

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writing exceedingly difficult technical exercises—exercises that are, to the poet, what Liszt's transcendental technical exercises are to the pianist. The fact that the surrealists for the most part have not even a rudimentary technique,—indeed, boast that they have no technique, made no difference to these critics.

Let us now, for a moment, examine the rudiments of my poetry.

I was brought up in the country, and mine is a country world. The artificiality of which my poems are accused is such that when I write of emotion I strip the passion down to the barest possible expression, a quintessential simplicity. When my poems deal with emotion, they are always the most simple and primitive emotions of simple and primitive people, as in *The Heart and the Hambone*, and *The Little Ghost who died for Love*. I write of a dead girl returning to the world in spring, or of the broken heart of a girl whose love was betrayed for the sake of a harlot, weeping for one who, living, was yet

This Dead, who fell that he might satisfy  
The hungry grave's blind need,—

That Venus stinking of the Worm,

*Trio*

I write of the mother who, murdered by her son,  
yet, in the darkness of death, remembers that

Once Judas had a childish kiss  
And still his mother knows but this,

and of the man whose dead love returned to warm  
him with her kiss.

The world I see is a country world, a universe  
of growing things, where magic and growth are one.

Sometimes, in these poems, we find a country-side where everything we see is a symbol of something beyond the world, but where the people live the life of growing things rooted deeply in the mould, and understanding only the world of the unawakened senses, and not the significance of their language—seeing the stars as no more remote than the flowers in their own potting-sheds, and the vast and unknown splendours as something homely, so that death and the eternal stars are no more strange.

To this countryside Death comes, not as a world-enveloping shade, but as

. . . goat-footed mincing Death,

a bucolic skeleton, with a clattering, hard footfall,  
—a rustic god, a satyr waiting for Beauty beneath  
the trees.

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In most of the Bucolic Comedies, there are no technical experiments, and usually the rhythm is a drone-sound like that of a hive or the wind in the trees. Some of the poems, again, have a goat-footed, rustic sound, deliberately uncouth—a hard quick uncouth rhythm—so that it seems as if we are not listening to the peasants' boots falling on a soft soil, but to the far earlier sound of satyr-hooves falling on a ground that is hard with winter, or harsh and sharp with spring, or mad and harsh with summer—or, to quote Rimbaud, to “the eclogues in sabots, grunting in the orchards.”

At moments, the shortness and roundness of the lines produce the effect of small uncouth buds breaking from the earth—daisy-buds for instance ; or they spurt like a hard shrill jet of water.

In many of these poems the subject is the growth of consciousness. Sometimes it is that of a person who has always been blind, and who, suddenly endowed with sight, must *learn* to see ; or it is the cry of that waiting, watching world, where everything we see is a symbol of something beyond, to the consciousness that is yet buried in this earth-sleep ; and it is this that we find in *Aubade*.

Sometimes we find a consciousness awakening from sleep, seeing, with a clearer, sharper vision

than that of the ordinary sense dulled with custom—piercing down to the essence of the thing seen, knowing that the ephemeral six-rayed snowflake is the counterpart of the six-rayed crystal in its eternity—seeing that

. . . all things have beginnings ; the bright plume  
Was once thin grass, in shady winter's gloom,  
And the furred fire is barking for the shape  
Of hoarse-voiced animals ; cold air agape  
Whines to be shut in water's shape and plumes ;

and so guessing at the immense design of the world,  
—at “ the correspondences whereby men may speak  
with angels.”

Sometimes, again, it is the fumbling of the un-awakened consciousness towards a higher state ; and sometimes it is a purely animal consciousness—the beginning of all earthy things, as in *Dark Song*. In many of these poems, the images have been held to be strange. I will explain one or two of them.

In *Père Amelot*, which is a poem about an un-awakened being, whose death, sharp and sudden, and inflicted for no purpose, leaves him nodding in his nightcap as he had done throughout his life—the image “ hen-cackling grass,” refers to quaker-grass, and it was suggested partly by the fact that

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the colour and dustiness of the pods are like the colour and dustiness of a hen, are dry, and have markings like those on a hen's legs, and partly by the fact that the shaking movement resembles, for me at least, the quick dry sound and dipping movement of a hen cackling.

In another poem, the lines

Hoarse as a dog's bark  
The heavy leaves are furred

refer to the sharp way in which certain leaves jut from their branches—and their rough furry, yet sharp quality. In the same poem, the line

Furred is the light

refers to misty moonlight.

The poems in *Façade* are, for the most part, abstract patterns, extremely difficult technical experiments. Some deal with materialism, and the world crumbling into dust, some have as protagonists shadows, or ghosts, moving, not in my country world, but in a highly mechanical universe ; others have beings moving

To the small sound of Time's drum in the heart,  
figures gesticulating against the darkness, from the warmth and light of their little candle-show.

The technical experiments are in the nature of inquiries into the effect on rhythm, and on speed, of the use of rhymes, assonances and dissonances, placed outwardly and inwardly in different places in the line, in most elaborate patterns ; and in the effect on speed of the use of equivalent syllables, that system which produces almost more variations than any other device.

Mr. Osbert Sitwell's poetry was, in the beginning, subjected to the same nonsensical treatment as was mine. It was said that his images were strange. If the images in his poems, or in mine, appear strange it is because our senses are like those of primitive peoples, at once acute and uncovered, —and they are interchangeable ; where the language of one sense is insufficient to cover a meaning, a sensation, we use another, and by this means, we attempt to pierce down to the essence of the thing seen, producing or heightening its significance by discovering in it attributes which at first sight seem alien, but which are actually related,—by producing its quintessential colour—(sharper, brighter, than that seen by an eye grown stale) and by stripping it of all unessential details. The apparent strangeness comes, too, from the fact that all expression is welded into an image and not squandered into a metaphor.

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My brothers and I share these acute sensual impressions. Our technical problems are necessarily different, because a woman has to form her own technique. She will not, if she is wise, use one suitable to men, because her muscles are not the same, and as I have said before, rhythm is, to some degree, the etheric body of the poet.

Mr. Osbert Sitwell's technique was, of course, in the beginning hailed as being unmusical, uncouth, etc. One expects that. The truth is that a great many people are unable to hear any rhythms that they do not expect to hear.

In each era of poetry, outward structure must inevitably undergo a change. In the Augustan age, the outward structure of poetry was the result of logic alone, while variations of speed, the feeling of heat or of cold, the variations of different depths and heights, were produced by means of texture, and were the result of sensibility and of instinct in this matter. Poetry was, therefore, in that age, as far as outward structure was concerned, the sister of architecture. With the Romantics, and their heightened vowel - sense, resulting in different melodic lines, poetry became the sister of music; now she appears like the sister of horticulture,— each poem growing according to the laws of its

own nature, but in a line which is more often the irregular though entirely natural shape of a tree or a flowering plant,—bearing leaves, bearing flowers, bearing fruit,—than a sharp melodic line, springing like a fountain.

It is because of these changes in the outward structure of poetry, that Mr. Osbert Sitwell's technique was, at first, misunderstood.

His problem,—and it is one of the great technical problems of today,—is the proper use of speech-rhythms, but speech-rhythms made dynamic, not slipping downhill.

But his more formal verse,—the verse written in forms to which people were accustomed,—is just as accomplished.

Mr. Sitwell has succeeded, when he writes of people, in fusing the character with its surroundings so that they are one,—the character grows from the soil as a tree or a flower. In some of the poems of the past, dealing with character, as with Browning, for instance, there was no background, there was no soil, the character knew neither trees nor flowers. Or where, as with certain American poets of twenty years ago, there was a background, the figures were soldered on it like shells on a box. They did not grow from the soil. As an example, at once,

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of this fusion, and of Mr. Osbert Sitwell's use of speech-rhythms, let us take the following poem :

MARY-ANNE,

Wise, simple old woman,  
Lived in a patchwork pavilion,  
Pitched on an island,  
Feeding the piebald and the tartan ducks.

Flotillas of ducks,  
Lie low in the water,  
And Mary-Anne seems  
The Duck-King's daughter.

The floating ducks crack up in their arrow-pointed  
wake

The distorted, silent summer painted in the lake,  
And the days disappear  
In a leaden stare.

Then Mary-Anne waddles  
Through the evening cool,  
And a smell of musk  
Lingers by the pool,  
For the trembling fingers of the honeysuckle  
Wring out the blue and the dew-drenched dusk.

✓ At night the pavilion  
Is hung by a silver cord  
That the nightingales plait  
With their intercoiling song.

### *Trio*

Within Mary-Anne mutters  
The Word of the Lord,  
Till the candle gutters,  
As the summer sighs outside  
And taps  
At the shutters.

Mr. Sacheverell Sitwell's technical achievement as a poet is certainly among the greatest produced in the last hundred and fifty years. His vowel technique, his sense of the use to be made of the different wave-lengths of the changing and shifting vowels (as, for instance, his handling of the difference between the length of the sharp "i" and the dulled "i"), the flowing and flowering and variation of his rhythms, his power over alliteration and natural pauses, and his knowledge of the effect on rhythm of these, are unsurpassable. So great, indeed, is his command over texture that not only does he produce variations in height, depth and length, slowness and speed, by this means, but the texture seems, indeed, to be the air we breathe, with all its subtle variations of warmth and chilliness, moving around us at times, or dying away.

Writing (in *The Pleasures of Poetry*) of a certain vowel-scheme in *Lycidas*, I said : " Certain blind people are enabled, by their deprivation of a later

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sense than that of feeling—sight—to know whether it is night or day simply by the sensation of the different lights on their skin. This vowel scheme appears to me to show the same sensibility." This applies also to Mr. Sitwell's acute sensibility to texture, his complete understanding of vowel schemes. " Melody," said Beethoven, " is the sensual life of poetry. Do not the spiritual contents of a poem become sensual life through melody?" This sensual life, this melody, are produced not only by the melodic line, but also by the cunning use of vowels ; although, as a rule, without the learned and instinctive use of consonants, sharpness of outline is lacking. It cannot be denied that certain vowels, used in a certain way, not only alter the actual surface of a line, but actually widen and stretch it. These, and the cunning use of liquids, give, too, the faintest and most subtle pauses, the feeling of air blowing between the words. Mr. Sitwell possesses this cunning, so that, at times, his texture is soft as the bosom of a bird, floating from sunny spaces among soft warm dark leaves, or it is deep as the shadow cast by branches weighted with dew, whilst at other moments it has a dark and terrible magnificence, or the sonority of metal. He has a complete understanding of all the varying

sonorities of the voices of marble and stone, and of the different metals. Indeed, in the poems which I am about to examine, light, air, colour, perfume, shadow, and all their subtle or deep variations, become sound : the world is not *set* to music, it *becomes* music, and the winds and the airs and lights blow in and over and around the words. The extraordinary sensuous beauty of the imagery, the spiritual contents of the poem and its sound are indivisible, born together as if they were body and soul.

Mr. Sitwell's world, like my own, is a country world, a world of growth, and of "a green thought in a green shade" as regards his lyrics ; his longer poems are on a great scale, vast in scope and in sound, the voice of primitive nature, before the fall of man and the age of gold.

The sensuous beauty of his poetry is unsurpassed. Take, for instance, these lines from *The Royal Hunt and Storm in the Forest* :

And another nymph, standing, that much better seen,  
Who took the eyes and held them, who had all the sun,  
Her body like a nectarine for hue and ripeness,  
As stained by the crocus, by the water lily,  
In dusty gold bruising her, shaken on her,  
All ripe, yet bitter, with the warm sun sweetened.

### *Three Eras of Modern Poetry—II*

Or, as a contrast, take the dark and mournful beauty of this extract from *Cephalus and Procris*:

But it was an ilex tragedy, those boughs of mourning  
Are ever dark for Procris, her very name  
In broken syllables is spoken by the leaves.  
Go not to the ilex for other things than this,  
The sound is sorrowful, of lights on armour ;  
Here Procris died from Cephalus, who killed her,  
Her ghost is in the ilex leaves, for ever watching,  
Looking in the orange wood,  
For a name of wind.

The only lights in this beautiful verse are in the poignant vowels of “ilex,” “name,” “leaves,” “lights,” and “died”; but in “looking in the orange wood,” the echoing “oo” sounds give us the feeling of the warm trees. I think, too, that some of the beauty of the dark and mournful sound of this fragment is the result of the name “Procris” being a dark half-echo of the brighter sound of “ilex,” a word which is at once dark, poignant, and glittering, and of the echoes, “broken,” “spoken,” and “ghost.”

In the same poem we find these lovely lines:

We will lie in the ilex shade to have an ilex dream,  
Be pompous and serious,  
Be solemn as deep water,  
In a cavern, fathoms down,

*Trio*

and in this the "s" sounds are like the whispering of dark leaves.

As a contrast to these fragments, let us now take certain passages from *Agamemnon's Tomb*, a poem which is, to my mind, one of the greatest poems written in the English language for over a century. It begins thus :

Tomb

A hollow hateful word

A bell, a leaden bell the dry lips mock,

Though the word is as mud or clay in its own sound ;

A hollow noise that echoes its own emptiness,

Such is this awful thing, this cell to hold the box.

It is breathless, a sink of damp and mould, that's all,

Where bones make dust and move not otherwise ;

Who loves the spider or the worm, for this,

That they starve in there, but are its liveliness ?

The grave-cloth, coldest and last night-gown,

That's worn forever till its rags are gone,

This comes at the end when every limb is straight,

When mouth and eyes are shut in mockery of sleep.

These lines, for all their desolated and hopeless quietness, have a strange majesty. Such is this poet's genius for the handling of words, that he can begin a poem whose normal lines vary from ten to fourteen

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syllables, with a line consisting of one word alone,—and the sound of this last echoes as though it were traversing the galleries of the dead.

It has been held of late, by the hordes of persons who cling round and impede the movement of the arts, that poetry need not be written by a man who knows his *métier*. It is necessary only that he should take an interest in left-wing politics, the housing problem, or the works of Marx, for him to become, automatically, a poet,—even if he has none of the vision of a poet, nor any technique whatsoever. It would be as foolish to recommend that a person who has not the hands of a pianist, who has neither touch, fingers, nor wrist technique, should become a public pianist simply because he has a good heart and is an ardent Communist.

We now come to the youngest generation of poets, both those who have been described by a witty friend of mine, Mr. Geoffrey Gorer, as the Y.M.C.A.—the Young Men's Communist Association—and a few others.

As you may have observed, the gentlemen who instruct our taste in the pages of the most priggish and dictatorial of the weekly papers,—that which is read in the Rectory and Manse, and that which is read in the fashion-stricken drawing-rooms of

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Bloomsbury,—these gentlemen are invariably the victims of anyone with a pup to sell.

Now, not all the young poets of whom I am about to speak are pups, but neither, on the other hand, are all of them new, and it is because of their newness that they have been acclaimed.

I understand from Mr. Day Lewis, *A Hope for Poetry*—a thoroughly silly book—that “there are superficial signs in the air at present of a boom in poetry.” This boom, according to Mr. Day Lewis, has been connected in certain quarters with the names of Messrs. Auden, Spender, and Day Lewis. Mr. Day Lewis forgets that there was also a boom in poetry connected with Mr. Alfred Noyes and Sir John Squire.

Mr. Auden arose, and, as I have said, was acclaimed as new. Nor, as far as I can make out, has he ever received so much as one single scratch. The reason for this is, that his newness is one to which the British public has been accustomed, now, for the last seventy years.

It takes a hundred and fifty years, almost to the day, for a tradition to be *recognized* as a tradition by the British public. The public will hear a thing and see a thing repeated over and over again through a hundred years without noticing that they have

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seen and heard it before. Still, it sinks into their unconscious minds and when they *do* hear it repeated, after about fifty years of repetition, it gives them a distinct pleasure. So, when Mr. Auden and certain other poets arose, the public greeted them as what they had been waiting for, although they *had* most of what they were waiting for, seventy years ago, given them by a major poet, Whitman.

Mr. Auden has not the harvesting vigour, the sweep of the countrysides, the abundant life that Whitman gives us. But he is, at his best, a very fine poet, though a minor one.<sup>1</sup> His technique, when he chooses, is beautiful; it has fluidity and control,—as in these lines :

And the traveller hopes : “ Let me be far from any Physician ; and the ports have names for the sea ; The cities, the corroding, the sorrow ; And the North means to all ‘ Reject.’ ”

And the great plains are for ever where the cold fish is hunted,  
And everywhere the light birds flicker and flaunt ;  
Under the scolding flag the lover  
Of islands may see at last,

<sup>1</sup> It is no insult to call a man a minor poet. Many very fine poets may be so described.

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Faintly, his limited hope ; and he hears the glitter  
Of glaciers the sterile miniature mountains intense  
In the abnormal day of this world, and a river's  
Fan-like polyp of sand.

This is very fine. It is inverted Whitman, but it is beautiful, and has a fine control of technique.

Now let us take another poem :

✓ Lay your sleeping head, my love,  
✓ Human on my faithless arm ;  
Time and fevers burn away  
Individual beauty from  
Thoughtful children, and the grave  
Proves the child ephemeral.  
But in my arms till break of day  
Let the living creature lie,  
Mortal, guilty, but to me  
The entirely beautiful.

Soul and body have no bounds :  
To lovers as they lie upon  
Her tolerant enchanted slope  
In their ordinary swoon,  
Grave the vision Venus sends  
Of supernatural sympathy,  
Universal love and hope ;  
While an abstract instinct wakes  
Among the glaciers and the rocks  
The hermits' sensual ecstasy.

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Certainty, fidelity  
On the stroke of midnight pass  
Like vibrations of a bell,  
And fashionable madmen raise  
Their pedantic boring cry ;  
Every farthing of the cost,  
All the dreaded cards foretell  
Shall be paid, but from the night  
Not a whisper, not a thought,  
Not a kiss nor look be lost.

Beauty, midnight, vision dies :  
Let the winds of dawn that blow  
Softly round your dreaming head  
Such a day of sweetness show  
Eye and knocking heart may bless,  
Find the mortal world enough ;  
Noons of dryness see you fed  
By the involuntary powers,  
Nights of insult let you pass  
Watched by every human love.

Now that poem is pure Rossetti, though it has not Rossetti's obesity. It has a certain beauty, yet it is full of outworn clichés :

But in my arms till break of day.  
The entirely beautiful.  
To lovers as they lie upon  
Her tolerant enchanted slope.  
Universal love and hope.

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Every farthing of the cost,  
All the dreaded cards foretell.

Not a whisper, not a thought,  
Not a kiss nor look be lost.

Beauty, midnight, vision dies.

Let the winds of dawn that blow  
Softly round your dreaming head.

Watched by every human love.

*Cliché* after *cliché*. . . . And Mr. Auden is, here, singularly unfortunate in his adjectives,—for only one in the whole poem tells us anything that we did not know. That is the adjective “faithless” in

Human on my faithless arm.

Yet the rhythm, the sound, is beautiful, and the poem is most accomplished. It *seems* to have an exquisite simplicity of diction; but this is quite deceptive; actually, the assonance-dissonance scheme is one of the utmost complication, and the apparent simplicity is due to his extraordinary mastery over his medium. The poem exhibits both the poet’s virtues and his faults. It appears to be floating above depths: but when we come to examine those further depths, what do we find? . . . If we take the phrase about “my faithless arm,” I suppose the

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grave is the cause of faithlessness. But I do not understand the reason for the lines

Thoughtful children, and the grave  
Proves the child ephemeral.

Why children ?

Every poem should arouse us to some new aspect of the world of sight, sound, or touch, some natural feeling that has been as yet unexpressed or not understood, even if it has no deep thought. In this poem we have no new aspect of the world, we have only a lulling sound: but it must be said that the beauty of the sound, the mastery over his medium is sustained throughout.

In *The Orators*, Mr. Auden's earliest book, he frequently reduces his subject to fragments, but rarely to elements (the latter is a valuable process). Still less does he rebuild the fragments. Mr. Auden does not organize his experience. His material, too, has often a purely temporary interest. It may be claimed that it represents the disintegration of the world in its present state, but it shows merely lack of fusion, looseness of interest.

Mr. Auden's faults are brought on him by a wish to hob-nob with the multitude, and then he loses his otherwise great control over his medium,

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and barks like a fox-terrier, in truncated, sharp, noisy lines.

Mr. Day Lewis, writing of *The Orators* in *A Hope for Poetry*, tells us that "No extract can do justice to the scope and fertility of imagination, the extraordinary mixture of sense and superstition, of schoolboyish exuberance and adult intuition which are to be found in this book. But here," he continues, "is a glimpse of his [Mr. Auden's] healer :

See him take off his coat and get down with a spanner  
To each unhappy Joseph and repressed Diana,  
Say Bo to the invalids and take away their rugs,  
The war-memorials decorate with member-mugs.

This is very nearly as appalling as Mr. Noel Coward at his best. Though naturally Mr. Auden is more competent than Mr. Coward. That goes without saying.

Nor can I commend such lines as these, written to a friend, in which he says that

. . . I

Have thought of you, Christopher, and wished beside me  
Your squat spruce body and enormous head.

The truth is that the poetry of Mr. Auden, like that of a great many other poets, is a poetry of escape. It is true that he, like nearly every other poet,

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grumbles a good deal, and often quite efficiently, about the state of the world, but in the end we find, either that we have to go away to some island, or take refuge on a faithless arm.

In spite, however, of these strictures, I have much admiration for Mr. Auden. It is not the fault of an exquisite minor poet if he is forced into the position of a major one.

And by minor poet I do not mean “poetaster.”

Now for Mr. Day Lewis. He *began* with many of the qualities that go to make a really fine poet. If we look at his earliest work, *Transitional Poem*, we shall find an extraordinary power of compression; he had an explosive force which showed below the line, he was profoundly original, and he had intellect. His technique, however, was insufficient, and he wrote too often in the short fox-terrier-barking lines that I have complained about already.

His beginnings were fine, but I do not think he has fulfilled his promise. His latter poems have a tough inelasticity of rhythm which has not the inevitability of the machine-world of which he writes. It would do all these young poets good to study the music of such composers as Gershwin and Cole Porter, music whose rhythm is inevitable and therefore fitted to be the mouthpiece of the

machine world. In these later poems of Mr. Day Lewis, he, like Mr. Auden in certain poems, is led towards disintegration, not cohesion, of matter and manner.

Mr. Stephen Spender is a very exquisite poet on a small scale. His poems have a white radiance and their shape is flawless. He has not the faults that Mr. Auden exhibits from time to time. He does not sink into bathos, nor does he bark like a fox-terrier. But again, he does not see quite so far as Mr. Auden. Mr. Spender also suffers from the fact that his admirers have tried to boost him from his true position as an exquisite minor poet to that of a major one.

I cannot admire the poems of Mr. Louis MacNeice. He, too, has a tough inelasticity of rhythm, his verse is either sticky in texture, or disintegrated, gritty, and sabulous. His rhythms are flabby, and he does not seem to notice anything he sees. His images are a loose rabble.

I would have liked to have devoted far more time to the three poets to whom I have come, for they are quite as important as Messrs. Auden and Day Lewis, but there were certain points which those poets illustrated, and I have but little space.

Mr. Ronald Bottrall has one of the most

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remarkable techniques of the day ; his poems are acutely sensitive and intelligent, and Mr. William Empson's poems are most remarkable. They have a strong animal life and strength which is most unusual. They have, too, at moments, a certain animal clumsiness, but this is a fault which will be overcome with time. He should certainly be read by everyone, for that animal life, and his powerful intellect.

And now I find myself ending the lecture with Mr. Dylan Thomas, the youngest of these poets. It is my conviction that Mr. Thomas has all the makings of a great poet, and *will be* one, if he is able to conquer the obscurity which is his greatest fault. He attains at moments to a real magnificence of diction, his technique has splendour and strength, he writes of primitive mysteries, of God revealed in all things.

Yes, surveying the verse of our time, I too believe that there is "A hope for poetry,"—beyond and outside the very local and parochial hope of which Mr. Day Lewis wrote in his book.



*Some Aspects of National Genius*

PALLADIAN ENGLAND

*Sacheverell Sitwell*



## PALLADIAN ENGLAND

*Mr. Chairman, Ladies, and Gentlemen,*

THE SERIES OF LECTURES at which you have attended have all been devoted to some aspect or other of the English character. The theme has been developed for you in prose and in poetry by my brother and sister. Charles Dickens, the greatest, in at least the comprehensive sense, of our authors, has been examined for you in some detail. His uneven genius must appeal in, at least, one of its facets to everyone who has the power to read ; and then, in continuance of the original theme, the stormy and far from pleasant seas of modern poetry have been explored and taken down in chart for you by one who at least is not afraid to leave out an

island, or a shoal of sand, when its existence is at all doubtful. A stern hand at the wheel, even when its fingers are feminine, is a necessity when sailing among so many mirages, so many dawns and so many false horizons. But now it is my turn, and my trembling voice must do its best to be heard with the aid of the microphone. But I should like to discuss microphones for a moment longer. It is not so long, Ladies and Gentlemen, since Mussolini spent an hour in silent prayer by the deathbed of Marconi. It was the least he could do. Where would dictators be without the microphone ? It is their god, and they are made in its image.

This reflection brings us at once to our subject, for a statue of a god must mean sculpture, and there is never sculpture without architecture. Men are to be known by their buildings ; and if a subsequent century betrays no curiosity towards our own it is our fault and but the mirror of our stupidities and of the false gods whom we worship. The Palladian coolness and stillness, its calm discipline and its restraint begin to emerge from out of the welter of voices and of styles. It is a rallying-point, like the thin red line at Balaclava. But, at this point, it is necessary to try and explain as nearly as possible what is implied in

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the title of this lecture. Palladian England I intend to be a generic term, like Elizabethan England ; and, just as a personality from other times can be spoken of as being a typical Elizabethan, just so we could make our selection of typical Palladians and enjoy thinking of them the more in knowledge of that.

Now Inigo Jones, in the words of an old dictionary of architecture, was the first person to introduce classical architecture into England. It is unnecessary to add that this was in the reign of King Charles the First. Of Inigo Jones we have, for all to see, the Banqueting Hall at Whitehall, and some portions of the palace at Greenwich. Wilton House, with its wonderful Double Cube Room and its paintings by Vandyke, is essentially private property. It may be one of the most beautiful homes in England, but this is of little moment to the greater public to whom we address ourselves here in this hall. Nevertheless, all and every one of you is in some sense involved in our theme. For you have before your eyes, in University College, one of the finest and last buildings of Palladian England, the façade of the College itself. Wilkins, the architect, could, it is evident, in his name, scarcely be more British. This is one of the last of

his works and represents the final solution of problems which had occupied him through his lifetime. I have been told that his original plan comprised a colonnade or open cloister down both sides of the open quadrangle. It is sad that this scheme was never completed ; but, even so, there is every reason to be satisfied with what was accomplished. The façade of University College is a correct and beautiful and impartial thing. And, in our choice of this last adjective, I am wondering, Ladies and Gentlemen, if it has occurred to you that there are only two other great countries in the world, besides our own, in which the lecture-rooms of universities are still halls of liberty. In other lands they have been degraded until they are little better than gymnasiums for compulsory games. Compulsory games are followed by compulsory military service ; and we all of us know where that leads. Let us all, then, enjoy this liberty of speech and thought, and resolve to keep it free from contamination and contagion.

That portico of white Portland stone, of which we have been thinking, is the very material of Palladian architecture in this land. I believe I am right in saying that it was Inigo Jones who first discovered the matchless properties of this stone.

The Banqueting Hall at Whitehall is built of it. There is a close identity between Portland stone and the white Istrian, of which the library of Sansovino is constructed. Those of you who know Venice will have appreciated that incomparable building. The library of Sansovino may be the masterpiece of classical architecture. In date it is just about a century earlier than Inigo Jones. Much of Venice, including the Church of the Salute, was built of this Istrian stone, which was quarried in the island of Brione. I could speak to you of the senselessness of that modern health resort, but it is better to think only of the white Istrian stone and let me take you straight back from the library of Sansovino to St. Martin-in-the-Fields.

But, at this point, two matters interpose themselves, one accomplished, and the other never really begun. The Palace of Whitehall, for which complete plans and drawings were made by Inigo Jones, never proceeded further than the Banqueting Hall. It was to have occupied the whole area between St. James's Park and the river and would have made London, in point of architecture, a finer city than Rome. St. Paul's Cathedral is the other interruption. In that we have Sir Christopher Wren, who never went to Italy and in domestic building

favoured the red brick of Holland (as can be seen in his façade at Hampton Court), competing in the high Italian, or classical, style. But St. Paul's Cathedral, upon which it would be possible to speak for many hours on end, must not be allowed to steal the picture. We said St. Martin-in-the-Fields, and it is a good moment to look at it. For the stone was washed, not long ago, and its disconcerting whiteness is beginning to darken once more with the smoke and fog of London. The church is the work of James Gibbs, an architect from Aberdeen, a man who was the friend of Hogarth, who painted his portrait. This church is entirely characteristic of the style. I believe there is no one who could fail to appreciate its splendid portico, the fine flight of steps upon which it stands, and the firm and delicate carving of the Royal Arms, a little masterpiece by itself, above the pediment. About the steeple of St. Martin-in-the-Fields a whole lot might be said. The steeples of these London churches are instinct with their date. They have, even, an exact chronological resemblance to the sugar-castors and pepper-pots of the time, of that wonderful early Georgian silver which is so unique and characteristic.

I would ask you, now, to take a look, next time

you pass it, at another masterwork of James Gibbs, the little church of St. Mary le Strand. It can be seen in splendid contrast to the huge and massive Bush building. I have been assured that this is by one of the best of American architects and that it is quite representative of the architecture of New York. Perhaps ! But the tiny façade and steeple of St. Mary's are no less than a lesson in good manners. It is orderly and eloquent. The other is inchoate and incoherent.

The steeples of London, built of this same white Portland stone, deserve a whole essay to themselves. That they made a strong appeal to foreigners, as being a characteristic of London, is evident in the painting of London by Canaletto, which is at Goodwood, and is the property of the Duke of Richmond. It is a picture which has been exhibited several times lately, notably at the Italian Exhibition at Burlington House, four or five years ago, and I believe I am right when I say that a beautiful Medici print has been made from it, so that it is readily accessible. This painting shows the white spires of London, down all the curve of the Thames, from Whitehall down to distant Greenwich. There are dozens and dozens of them, dwindling and diminishing into the distance. The domes and

minarets of Istanbul are not more typical than the Palladian spires of London.

They are to be seen, also, in many works of Hogarth, not least in his matchless "Beer Street" and "Gin Lane." In one of these, above the tottering and swaying houses, we get the statue of George II, just as we can see it now, on Hawksmoor's church of St. George's, Bloomsbury, an architectural fantasy which was imagined by Hawksmoor, its creator, to be an exact copy of the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus. There, Herodotus was buried, and the temple was counted one of the seven wonders of the world. But standing, even now, in these reaches of upper Shaftesbury Avenue, you can turn from that distant view of George II above the house-tops and see the white steeple of St. Giles-in-the-Fields, a most satisfying and ingenious composition in architecture. In fact, on my hundreds of visits to the Reading Room of the British Museum, I pass by it every time and it is never yet monotonous. I commend this to you, Ladies and Gentlemen, as one of the beauties of London.

It is easy, also, to praise St. George's, Hanover Square, but that is a church which is almost out of place. For such buildings are typical to us of the City, that curious town, to itself, which has a

population by day, of hundreds of thousands and, at night, is given over to a few caretakers and a few policemen. I wish there was time to examine some more of these City churches. They are in a class by themselves. One of their charms is the unlikely places in which they are to be found, such as Wapping Stairs. Many of them contain wonderful carvings by Grinling Gibbons and his school. St. Lawrence, Jewry, at which the new Lord Mayor attends after his election, is remarkable, for instance, for the elaborate metal sword-rests, or sword-stands, scattered here and there among the pews. But their treasures are not easily exhausted and, as I say these words, I am reminded how many of them are entirely unknown to me.

It is not necessary, though, to undertake the long and complicated journeys by motor-bus and by tube which are implied in the mention of Wapping or of Greenwich. If in search of Palladian England, there is no necessity to go farther afield than White-hall. I refer to the splendid building of the Horse Guards, and this is our introduction to William Kent, the greatest name in the movement after Inigo Jones. William Kent was born, in 1684, at Rotherham in Yorkshire. He was the son of a coach-painter, and, having shown some of the talents

of a prodigy, attracted the attention of Lord Burlington and was sent at an early age to Italy. Lord Burlington, I may remind you, is the greatest name among our amateurs of architecture. Besides his property in Ireland, at Lismore, Lord Burlington had an estate at Londesborough, in Yorkshire, at no very great distance, in fact, from Rotherham. At this place he owned a splendid house and created what must have been one of the most beautiful of formal gardens in England. Alexander Pope stayed there ; and part of his *Essay on Taste* is both a satire and an encomium upon his host. All is now destroyed. His descendant, the Duke of Devonshire, unfortunately demolished the house and let go the garden, about 1820. The admiration of Lord Burlington for Inigo Jones amounted to a positive cult and, in this, his chief instrument was William Kent, who was something of a universal genius. Let us enumerate some of his activities !

He illustrated, not very well, Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, and, to much better effect, Gay's *Fables*. He painted in fresco, specimens of which are to be seen at Kensington Palace. He designed dresses and, in one notable instance, decorated a crinoline with designs of the five orders of architecture. The state barge which he planned for George II can be seen

in the Victoria and Albert Museum, and a very beautiful thing it is. He invented the English or landscape garden, a good instance of which is at Rousham, in Oxfordshire. He built Holkham, in Norfolk, with, in my opinion, a very dull and disappointing exterior, too like a classical Victorian villa, but with magnificent interiors ; he built Devonshire House, in Piccadilly, all gone now, except the gates leading into the Green Park. They, at least, are easily seen and so is the Horse Guards, completed after his death, which, incidentally, I have been told, is, from the close description of it, in the opinion of doctors, the first ascertainable death from appendicitis. This disagreeable event took place in 1748. The Horse Guards, then, may be dated from 1750, a very easy year to remember and one, moreover, which marks an epoch in the history of art, because it was the year in which Johann Sebastian Bach died.

If this was any other country but England there would be, at least, a book about William Kent. There is none. We have not come here to talk about trifles like furniture ; or it could be said that Kent was the foremost and most magnificent designer of furniture there has ever been in England. His work in that direction is, really and truly, work

in the grand manner. The furniture designed by him for the Walpole family and still preserved at Houghton, in Norfolk, must be the proof of our contention. At last there was an Englishman who was able to design upon a level with the great Venetians or Romans. For a hundred years, and more, this had been attempted. The furniture in the Double Cube Room, at Wilton, is not by Inigo Jones. In his time there was no one who could carry such work into execution. It was all designed, a hundred years after the day of Inigo Jones, by William Kent. And yet, there is no discrepancy. This most dangerous task has been successfully accomplished without harm. That consideration will give us the measure of Kent's greatness.

But let us look, for a moment longer, at the Horse Guards. This is a building which will increase in our estimation every time we pass it by. It is distant and restrained, and then the perfection in its proportion will dawn upon our minds. It may not be great architecture, because it is determined not to be theatrical or flamboyant. But how cleverly contrasted are its sparse ornaments and its flat surfaces which delight by their material, by the inherent beauties of that white limestone, and by the discreet joints in the masonry. The cupola'd

dome is so accurately placed, and raised to exactly the right height. Nothing is concealed ; nor is anything thrust forward into the view. There is no exaggeration anywhere. In fact, if we were not so used to them, the breastplates and gauntlets and plumed helms of the Life Guards and the Blues might seem in dubious taste. But no, they are the perfect embodiment of that building, although, if we must descend to details, their very accoutrements are an anachronism, for no cavalry had worn breastplates since the first quarter of the eighteenth century. Their re-creation was part of the flamboyance of George IV ; it belongs to the revived classicism of Flaxman and Pistrucci. These are not meant to be mediaeval knights ; their helmets and breastplates are an adaptation from the classical figures of Flaxman, or of John Storrs the silversmith. The English gift of compromise has fitted them to this strictly Palladian building and made them inseparable from it.

But, now, we will leave Whitehall and delay for a moment over what would seem to me one of the supreme achievements of the Palladian spirit in England. This is Worcester Lodge, one of the lodges of the park at Badminton in Gloucestershire. It can be seen and, indeed, passed upon a main

road to Bath so that it is, in a sense, public property. It will be realized at once, that the old Temple Bar of Inigo Jones has played a part in its design. But this is a conception of great and startling originality. It is a real invention in architecture. Its purpose was to be, both a gateway upon the triumphal scale, and, also, to house a dining-room from which wonderful views extend down to the Bristol Channel and the Welsh hills. This interior is, actually, of great beauty ; but what must interest us is the splendid rustication of the two lower floors and the magnificent Palladian window and balcony above the keystone of the arch. To either side, two peculiar little pyramidal pavilions or lodges complete this design, which, in effect, is timeless and might be the Inigo Jones of 1650 instead of dating from nearly the middle of the next century. I find it difficult to praise this building too highly, in point of originality and poetry. Through its archway, on a misty day of autumn or winter, or for the matter of that, of spring or summer, the long green avenues can be seen leading down to the house, some two miles away, and guarded by the great belt of trees which, from where we stand, forms a ring or circle twelve miles round.

Curiously enough, and, it is probable, in purposeful rivalry, there is another triumph of minor classical building, a mile or two away upon the same road, on the way to Bath. This is the circular lodge to Dodington Park, and, like that house, itself, is the work of Wyatt. This architect, it will be remembered, was to work as much in the sham Gothic as in the classical style. This circular lodge, which is a really beautiful thing, based upon a close study of Roman building, upon the circular temple, for instance, at Tivoli, becomes the more remarkable when we realize that an architect, capable of this classical distinction, and not inferior, in fact, to Adam at his best, could throw himself wholeheartedly into the Gothic style. The two things are utterly dissimilar. Their conjunction in one person is as unlikely as it would be to discover Chopin writing the music of Wagner.

Finally, for we have other things than buildings to consider, we will end with the Palladian bridge. This is not unique. There is the beautiful Palladian bridge of Wilton Park and the not inferior Palladian bridge of Prior Park, near Bath. Its traditional design is taken directly from the plans and drawings of Palladio ; at which point I realize that it is the first time Palladio has been mentioned in this paper.

It is, unfortunately, not the place to delay over more than the mere mention of him. Those who are interested in Palladio will already know that England contains no fewer than four replicas or variants upon his famous Villa Rotonda, at Vicenza, the best-known of these being Mere-worth Castle, in Kent, and the villa at Chiswick, which was built by the afore-mentioned Lord Burlington. We must return, therefore, for time is growing short, to the Palladian bridge. The first of the two stands in the pleasure-grounds of Wilton and might be described as the perfect accompaniment to Sidney's *Arcadia*, which was created, also, among those matchless woods. At Prior Park, outside Bath, the Palladian bridge stands at the opening, or swelling, of a trumpet-shaped valley. It comes down like the mouth of a trumpet, or, more picturesquely, like the curves of a cornucopia, and the City of Bath with its stone circuses and crescents lies just where the cornucopia would pour out its fruits or sheaves. The Palladian bridge is a perfect harmony of design and proportion. At the same time, as a bridge, it is a pure architectural caprice and would be entirely useless as a solution to any traffic problem. It conforms, in fact, to that old truism of the 'nineties that all art should be entirely

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useless. It is, indeed, more of a memorial than a bridge. But its Virgilian authority and calmness, the beauty of its stilted diction, transport us into a world of peace and order. Nothing is more soothing to the spirit than the health-giving properties of this deliberate and timeless building. It has the perfection of the greatest classical music. If it is comparable to anything in music, its equivalent is to be found in Beethoven's Rasumofsky Quartets, works of his maturity written at about his fortieth year.

I hope that, by now, over this question of the Palladian spirit, enough has been said about its architectural manifestations. If we recapitulate them, for a moment, it is to take leave of them. I have tried, I hope it has been noticed, to draw attention only to those which are readily accessible and can, therefore, in a sense, be termed public property. St. Martin-in-the-Fields and the Horse Guards are tangible proof of my contention ; while Worcester Lodge, almost my only example in the country, is only a few feet removed from a public highway. If William Kent has been, after Inigo Jones, the chief protagonist, there could be other specimens indefinitely multiplied. The name of the Adam brothers will come immediately to mind ;

but enough, and more than enough, has already been said, or the mere catalogue of strict classical buildings up and down the land might occupy us until midnight. For my object is to examine the Palladian spirit; and, so far, it has only been necessary to demonstrate my meaning by a glance at its architectural background, or foundation. It has to be something more than a mere chilly aloofness; or the traditional Englishman, who is supposed, by foreigners, never to speak to his neighbour in his club, or in a railway train, will be all that we shall find. And that would be, indeed, a most fallacious conclusion, for, in just the same way that England contains every kind of natural scenery, mountains, plains, marshes, garden-cities, fogs, slums, fells, dales, etc., etc., so it includes types, beyond number, of the human race. Colonel Blimp may be found, side by side with the English old maid, who is, more than likely, his sister, while the traditional silent man in train or bus will be sitting next to a typical and garrulous Cockney, or will be passed, and overtaken, by the Rolls-Royce containing Horatio Bottomley. There is, in fact, no such a person as the typical Englishman. You can read all through Dickens, whose gallery of characters is as populated as a largish town, and be left uncertain

as to which of them is most typically English as a character. Mr. Micawber, Mrs. Mantalini, Pecksniff, Oliver Twist, Bill Sikes, Uriah Heep, Mr. Pecksniff's daughters, how is it possible to decide between them?

It is, then, only one facet of the English character that we are in any hopes to isolate and identify. The consensus, or total of that, can only be fixed when all have been examined. Now the first instance that I can think of, who was possessed by the necessary degree of lofty detachment, saying this in no spirit of disparagement, was the great Duke of Wellington. His appearance, in itself, was of a definite architectural importance. It has been said that the sight of his profile in the field was equivalent to a reinforcement of twenty thousand men. In our days of dread and uncertainty, the sensation upon seeing a bust of the Duke of Wellington is one of immediate relief. The sight of what Benjamin Haydon calls the "old eagle" is, at once, reassuring and calming. This was a man, who, not born a genius, by perseverance and will, brought down one of the greatest enemies of the human race and restored sanity. After the wars, the making of peace was, wisely, entrusted in large part to him. The result was a peace which lasted for fifty-five

years, until 1870, with Germany ; and that has endured, ever since, for a hundred and twenty-five years, with the French, who used to be our hereditary enemies and are, now, bound to us in close ties of friendship and alliance. I am not suggesting that Wellington was as successful in politics as he was in the arts of war ; but, at least, he was better as a peacemaker than the professional diplomatist. If you compare his physiognomy with that of the generals in the last war, you see, it may be, the true measure of his greatness. Our terrier faces, or those of the German mastiffs, are so characterless compared with the lean ability and pertinacity of Wellington. But the statue of Napier, in Trafalgar Square, is another lesson in phrenology. No man with a head like Napier would lose a battle. In the last year or two, if we have learnt nothing else, we may have discovered the need of such men as Napier and his brothers, who form the defences, behind whom artists and writers and peaceful citizens can proceed, unhindered, at their work.

A great part of the career of Napier was concerned with India ; and I would select India as a great example of the Palladian spirit, just as the crumbling buildings in that style, at Lucknow, or even at Calcutta, are our only artistic legacy to that

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huge continent. The new Delhi, which it is easy to complain about and find fault with, is, at least, one of the few great architectural expressions of the twentieth century. In India, the English succeeded to the Mogul Emperors and there could be no greater contrast. The India of Akbar and of Shah Jehan may have been, with the Persia of Shah Abbas, the greatest epoch of visual splendour in history. There has never been a period when silks and materials, generally, were so beautiful in design and so lovely in colour. The Mogul Emperors lived in a train of magnificence, with which the contemporary James I of England or Louis Treize of France could not bear comparison. The East India Company, even with its Nabobs, was the negative of this. But, at this present moment, a continent of, I believe I am right in saying, three hundred and forty million inhabitants, has less than seventy thousand white troops to control it. This unostentatious force and authority has received, in the last year or two, as it were, an unsolicited tribute in the colonial methods of other countries, which have had to employ the bulk of their armed strength, and more than that amount of vehemence and rhetoric, in order to obtain possession of land populated by less than ten millions of, mostly, un-

armed Africans. There may be many and grave faults to be charged against the English in India, but, if they left, they would be missed, and many millions would wish them back.

Another instance of the spirit for which we are seeking could be discovered in the peace made after the South African War. This war, which was far from edifying in its origin, and horrible as only a small war can be during the three years that it lasted, had, for its conclusion, a peace upon generous lines, which should have been a model for the Peace Conference after the last war. The spirit of conciliation and restraint found its just reward; and there is no one in this hall who could not remember the names of, at least, two famous Afrikanders who fought against England, thirty years ago, and then became our friends.

So much for politics and for history! The career, and, more certainly, the appearance of Wellington has been the most perfect example of our thesis. In his old age, when still Commander-in-Chief and something of a fossil, for largely owing to his influence, though he had just died, the English embarked upon the Crimean War as if it were the Peninsular War of nearly fifty years before, Wellington must have looked like an old

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classical ghost. I have seen a rare book of caricatures in which he appears like a ghost in every council of war, and upon the parade-ground. He is like the statue of the Comendador in *Don Juan* and, if we have mentioned him so often in the last few minutes, it is because we can almost hear him rapping upon the door, through this long-drawn and perpetual crisis in our destinies.

If we, now, leave politics for literature, it is to draw attention to that typical poet of the Silver, or Augustan, age, Alexander Pope. *The Rape of the Lock*, written when Pope was twenty-four years old, is no less than a miracle of grace and lightness. Never has any poem dwelt in such an air of elegance and civilization. There are moments in which no distance in time seems to separate Pope from Virgil. But the same heroic couplets which can float and hover so airily, or can resound with epigram, are used towards the end of his career as flails and scorpions in the terrible *Dunciad*. The fourth book of this poem becomes almost insane in its horrid imagery and in the squirming, writhing nonentities at whom it lashes. Even so, it contains what may be the loveliest lines ever written by Pope: Their truly Palladian impeccability makes it irresistible to quote from them:

*Trio*

To where the Seine, obsequious as she runs,  
Pours at great Bourbon's feet her silken sons ;  
Or Tiber, now no longer Roman, rolls,  
Vain of Italian arts, Italian souls :  
To happy convents, bosomed deep in vines,  
Where slumber abbots, purple as their wines :  
To isles of fragrance, lily-silvered vales,  
Diffusing languor in the panting gales :  
To lands of singing, or of dancing slaves,  
Love-whisp'ring woods, and lute-resounding  
waves.

But chief her shrine where naked Venus keeps,  
And Cupids ride the lion of the deeps ;  
Where, eased of fleets, the Adriatic main  
Wafts the smooth eunuch and enamoured swain !

The last two couplets contain a miraculous picture of the decadence of Venice. In the eighteenth century Cupids did, indeed, ride the lion of the deeps ; while, in the last line of all, we have an echo of the great castrati singers of the time, of Farinelli or Egiziello.

It was upon but rare occasions that Pope changed the classical order of his rhymed couplets. Within their strict framework he achieved every conceivable variety of sound and texture, altering their speed to suit his purposes, parrying and then delivering his shafts of wit, or the stunning neatness and accuracy of his images. This strict framework within

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which his genius ran has, merely because of those set limitations, an analogy to the formal and frigid architecture, to the flights of steps, the colonnades, the correct orders, the imperturbable stone façades of Palladian building. Nothing is the result of accident: all is deliberate and considered.

It is said that rules are made to be broken. There is a kind of genius who transcends all the set limitations and is a law unto himself. But, also, there is that other kind to whom order is enough, and who can give rein to the freest play of their imaginations within the accepted conventions. Of that sort, though they could not be more dissimilar, are Alexander Pope and Mozart. In fact, the manifold differences between them, I do not mean, it is needless to say, in the vehicle of their art, but in the soul or spirit of their separate personalities, is a proof of the far-apart continents of thought and poetry that can be attained to, while conforming to the strictest grammatical rules of structure and harmony. If such men as these can keep to the code of manners it would seem to be an impertinence on the part of others to attempt to break them. There is, however, to contradict this, the whole body of the Romantic creation. We have become involved, in fact, in that endless struggle

between the Classical and the Romantic. Any battle entails the mingling of forces. We might find, if there was time for it, more romantic feeling in Pope than in Byron or Sir Walter Scott ; and more of the correct classical spirit in Landor, or in *Atalanta in Calydon*, than we could discover in Pope's *Iliad*.

A love for the strictest kind of classical building, placed, it would seem, at first, inappropriately, in midst of the English landscape, does not mean that it is our preference over every other kind of building. The chilly aloofness and detachment of its style, its air of discretion and impartiality, have only lately begun to wear their true distinction. In the welter of styles and creeds, political, poetical, architectural, this classical manner has the advantage of order and uniformity. It is not in the least that English invention, the compromise, which is only another word for procrastination and for disappointment for everyone concerned. But it is impartial and capable of looking after itself, even in the most uncongenial surroundings. This coolness of head and restrained strength are its virtues. These are qualities which are to be discovered in many and unexpected places in the English character. I have tried, in the short time that has been at

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my disposal, to isolate some few instances of these qualities, or virtues, both in historical characters and in works of the human imagination, whether in Portland stone, or in the not less permanent and ineffaceable printer's ink. It is, in my opinion, by the cultivation, for the time being, of these precepts that sanity can be retained and secured for the world, and that all of us, more especially the young, can avoid the two opposing political creeds which are the delusion and danger, not to say the actual curse, of present-day humanity.



*Some Aspects of National Genius*

GEORGE CRUIKSHANK

*Sacheverell Sitwell*



# GEORGE CRUIKSHANK

*Mr. Chairman, Ladies, and Gentlemen,*

IN SEEKING TO IDENTIFY some phases of the national genius there has been lacking, so far, anything in the nature of a pictorial commentary upon our subject. William Hogarth, it is true, might have served our purpose, but Hogarth is, already, remote from us in time. The bag-wig of the early eighteenth century, the silver shoe-buckles, and the hooped skirts of the time, belong to another and a distant world. We want to feel the touch of living human beings, and to move in a London which is not unrecognizably itself. But these wants once established, there could be no more hesitation. George Cruikshank is the inevitable, the only

### *Trio*

answer to this need, for in his works we can find the entire picture of the first half of the nineteenth century.

My only trouble has been to know where to begin. I have admired his drawings since childhood and their fascination never ceases. Eventually, I have decided to take all my illustrations, except one, from the *Comic Almanack* and to start straight away upon them, trying to find time, at the end, to say a little in a more general sense about this wonderful artist, for the kind of drawing which we are now about to consider represents only one phase, or facet, of his output, and, in order to give him his true rank, the rest of his achievement must, at least, be touched upon.

We will begin, then, at once, with the *Comic Almanack*, a yearly publication which ran from 1835 till 1852 ; but it will be noticed that all our instances are taken from its early years—actually the first six years of its issue. The *Comic Almanack* was published in editions of many thousands. It contains an etched plate for every month of the year, as well as innumerable small decorations and vignettes in woodcut, some excellent black silhouettes among them, all by the hand of Cruikshank. I must warn you, at this point, that I do not suppose any

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magic-lantern slides of these drawings have ever been made before. I cannot answer for what effect they will give, enlarged upon the screen, but in a moment or two we shall know the worst. In any case, the experiment cannot fail to be interesting.

Our first choice is for June 1836, and its title is *A Holiday at the Public Offices*. This is an extremely funny drawing. It is the sort of holiday we all know so well, which consists in staying, so to speak, in school. At the same time it is possible, even so, to be infinitely annoying to those other persons who have anything else to do. It is a kind of stay-in strike, only with a difference. There is something most aggravating to the nerves in this paralysis of the public services. Members of the public are, in fact, besieging the place. They can be seen looking in anger and alarm through the open door in the partition. But the sleeping dog should be a warning to them. The attitude of the officials to the public, on this day of all days, is one of the most absolute and complete indifference. Look at the middle-aged man, the senior clerk, perhaps, who stands with his hands in the fobs of his waistcoat, entertaining two of his colleagues as though standing in the bow-window of a club. Right in the centre, and facing us, another member of the confraternity is com-

pletely obliterated by his *Morning Herald*. Next to him, another one is just, frankly, fast asleep. Only the clerk who is nearest to the door retains some vestiges of life, and reads his newspaper, though we know quite well that he would never answer any question addressed to him. In a few minutes, that summer noon of 1836 will strike, and all of them be released from their uneasy rest. For this is the sort of sleep which possesses the officials in the ticket office, only a moment before the train leaves from a village station ; or the officers in a customs-house, if ever they do sleep, when speed is a matter of life or death and our whole future seems to depend upon their mood.

The next picture that we have chosen portrays for us a London fog. If the reproduction is a little dim I cannot see that it will do any harm. We want it to be as foggy as possible. It is a phantasmagoria of the smoke and soot of London. You will notice the horse's head looming towards you out of the mist and the hansom and hansom-driver nearly invisible behind it. Other ghostly forms of cab-drivers tower out of the darkness. There is a little Cockney child, probably the only person enjoying the fog, acting as torch-bearer ; while the whole right hand of the drawing is taken up by an elaborate

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old pantomime joke with a ladder. Five persons are involved in this ; one of whom has had his top-hat jammed right down on to his shoulders, so that he looks like a scarecrow. In another moment that spectral horse will be upon them and worse complications will follow. I know of no other good drawing of a London fog. The fog was a thing which particularly impressed foreigners. The French caricaturist, Gavarni, was appalled by it and by the wickedness of the slums. We can read, also, in Verlaine's letters what he thought of the London fogs of 1872, thirty long years later. It is not a pleasant picture of London that is to be drawn from his letters. Perhaps it required a born Cockney, like Cruikshank himself, to grasp the true characters abroad in this November evening.

And, now, we come to another November day, upon this occasion it is in the year 1837. We might say that it is almost exactly a hundred years ago today. It is St. Cecilia's Day ; and unfortunately I have neglected to discover upon which date of the month this falls. Let us imagine, though, that it is the 4th of November. This etching is a very grand and elaborate composition, as you will observe. It is the feast of St. Cecilia, the patron saint of harmony, and every conceivable variety of street

### *Trio*

musician is to be seen and heard. The street musicians of that time were, apparently, an infernal nuisance. Dicky Doyle, another famous comic draughtsman, was made ill by them and given a nervous breakdown from which he never recovered. They used to play, on purpose, below his windows in order to annoy him. It would seem as if Cruikshank was another sufferer ; but he has left us, at any rate, a wonderful study of his tormentors.

Let us, now, look at his etching in detail. I like to think that this St. Cecilia's Day is as typical of London as the scene of Stravinsky's *Petrouchka* is of the St. Petersburg of about the same date. Those of you, also, who have seen *Petrouchka*, will remember the cabmen and the nurses, the bear led on its chain, the hurdygurdy, the gypsies, and all the personalities of the fair. Certainly the noise of that fair is not less loud and discordant than St. Cecilia's Day, here in London. I have counted seventeen different forms of music all sounding at once. On the left you will see a military band, the soldiers still wearing the tall, plumed shako of the Peninsular War. They have a gigantic negro musician with them, as was the custom in many regiments until about 1850. He was gorgeously dressed, in silks and turban, and marched ahead of them, like an

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exaggerated drum major. He is seen, in this picture, a tambourine in one hand, but his chief instrument is the immense sistrum, or rattle, that towers up to the first-floor windows in the near-by houses. A young boy, not a foot away from him, plays a guitar and appears to be singing a love song. In front of him, two butcher's boys play the bones. This pair of butcher's boys are inimitably drawn. They look spoiling for a fight ; and, apart from the soldiers, are the only not semi-starving musicians in the scene.

Standing with his back to them, and looking towards the military band, you will see the hurdy-gurdy man, his box on his back, and still grinding out a tune, an air, very probably, from some opera by Rossini. The very dark, perhaps velvet, cap that he wears is an important point in the composition.

The centre, or pivot, of the etching is the Punch and Judy show. Cruikshank, it is interesting to remember, had made, in 1828, the woodcuts for a book on Punch and Judy which has remained the classic upon that subject. Below the marionette show a man bangs the big drum and, at the same time, plays the pipes. In front of him a muffin man, only I confess to being unable to discover the muffins, rings, desperately, a handbell and has to

*Trio*

hold his hand to his mouth in order to cry his wares. At about this point the din is appalling.

The foreground consists of a terrible, starving family, a father, mother, and four children, all bawling some song. Nobody, on seeing this, can doubt the humanity of Cruikshank. I would like you to look at the man's battered top hat, at his set and drawn features, at the terrible tattered coat, the thin sleeves, the thin waist, the dreadful knock-kneed trousers. It is awful to think of the room to which this dreadful family will come back for the night. Some of you may be reminded, in this group, of the wonderful paintings of Picasso's blue period, when his subjects were just such people as these. Cruikshank has got with wonderful accuracy the slow, almost imperceptible, walk of these poor things, a movement which, I am sorry to say, you can see any day, now, in London. You can hear also the slow drawl of their song, with words which generally are in dreadful satire upon themselves, singing of impassioned love, or something wildly inappropriate like a sea ballad.

Behind them, a coach full of passengers is driving off, and the conductor joins his posthorn to the tumult. In front of this a man resolutely plays the double bass ; there is a violinist scraping

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disconsolately along ; a child plays the triangle ; another beats a tambourine ; two men, outside a house labelled Concert Room, play trombones ; and a man is trying to sell songs. In the midst of them you will notice the Highland musician, as he can be seen now, and he is, to my experience, the most excruciating of the lot. I have left till last the appalling little Savoyard in the foreground. He wears the Calabrian peaked hat, grinds and grinds his hurdy-gurdy, and is so low in the human scale that Cruikshank, with a touch of genius, has made him look at the starving dog, near by, as if they were on a level and in rivalry with each other. His expression, in fact, is exactly as if the dog had done him out of some good turn, a crust of bread lying in the gutter, it may be. We dare not think to what cellar, or hole in the ground, this little creature will creep for the night.

Such, in brief detail, is St. Cecilia's Day. I think it is a wonderful study of London street life. In the background, almost as if in signature of London, you will see one of the white spires of Portland stone which I extolled to you, only on Monday evening.

The next scene is of a very different description. It is a May evening, in 1840, and takes us on to the

stage of the opera. May is still the month, nearly a hundred years later, when the opera is at Covent Garden, then, as now, probably in danger of being pulled down. We need not pay much attention to the accident which is the joke of this etching ; it will not be serious. But the trap, at least, makes a fine black in the middle of the drawing and, like a stage within a stage, groups to better advantage all the various figures of the scene. This is an etching which is a most typical specimen of Cruikshank's technique. The strong blacks by which the design is co-ordinated, is held together, are the very touch of Cruikshank. And it must be remembered that these plates, which were bitten with the acid and printed with his own hands, are, in a very special way, the personal relics of his genius. Woodcuts, or the engravings upon steel which he favoured later on in his life, are never to the same extent the production of his actual hands. These etchings of the *Comic Almanack* are Cruikshank direct, and not seen with the aid of some other printer or engraver.

The scene contains many amateurs of the stage, many balletomanes, and all the personalities of the pre-Wagnerian opera. Its composition begins, so to speak, with the man who is on his knees, furiously hammering at the scenery. Below him, the char-



A New Drop Scene at the Opera. May 1840

George Cruikshank



## George Cruikshank

acters spread out to either side, into the wings. We see a crowned and bearded figure, sceptre in hand, like a kind of Neptune, or sea god. On the right two elephants, complete with Indians, are ready for the stage. Cruikshank has remembered, it will be noticed, that elephants are grey and not black. Their presence suggests that this opera is by Meyerbeer, but *L'Africana* was not performed until 1865, so this is more likely to be one of the grand operas of Spontini, if, indeed, any definite opera is intended. It is just grand opera, the pre-Wagnerian opera, as I have said.

Continuing with the different characters, we see a knight in armour, like a subject from one of the Hoxton prints ; and, on the extreme right of the picture, the sort of figure who might give us a serenade in the next act, it might well, in fact, be Count Almaviva from *Il Barbiere*. He is talking to one of the ballerinas ; and, then, we must look over to the opposite corner where the prima ballerina, with high plumes in her hair, is trying some steps over for the benefit of two admirers. Her black shawl, like a mantilla, is beautifully drawn. But my favourite personality, in all this crowded assembly, is the soot-black little boy on the side of the stage that we have just quitted. He

holds a trident in his hand and is transfixed with delight and astonishment at the accident that has just happened. This infant, for he cannot be more than three or four years old, may remind us of Edmund Kean, who started his career doing these sort of rôles at the age of four, lying, we are told, like a black-eyed Cupid at the feet of Sylvia, in a ballet by the great Noverre. All round, and in every direction, the stage hands are hammering, or are carrying wooden thrones and pieces of scenery for the next act. Cruikshank, who was the most consistently stage-struck of English artists, has given us an illustration which is the perfect epitome of the old operatic stage.

For our next scene we return again to the winter. On this occasion it is December 1838, and the particular day is Christmas Eve. Nothing has ever been more typical of London than this. See the lamppost, for instance, on the extreme left of the picture, and look at the old naval gun standing, where it may still stand, with the initials of George IV or William IV upon it, at the opposite corner. Look at the sham Gothic Church, with windows lit from inside by the Christmas Eve service, and then look at the flat snow-covered roofs and at the tall building in the centre of the composition. But

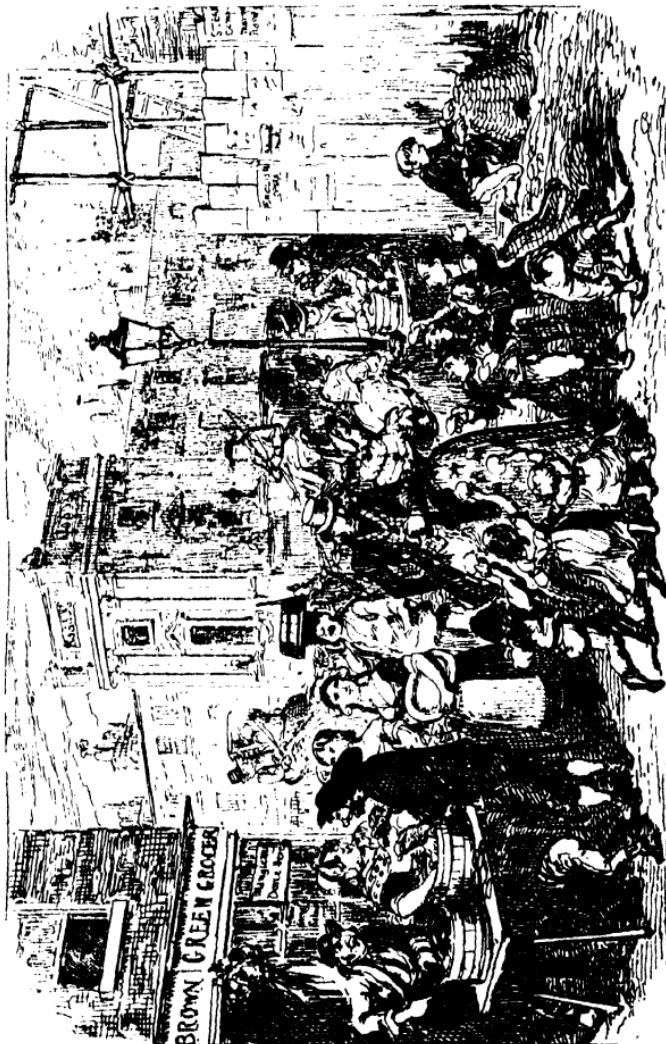
the right-hand side is taken up with what is the most typical part of all, the bow-shaped front of that Regency building, outside which people are dancing. It is, obviously, a publichouse and the huge lamp hanging outside it is of a sort still to be met with in London. Those bow-shaped Regency buildings are, unfortunately, fast disappearing, though there are still two or three splendid specimens near the Strand, and at least one or two in the neighbourhood of Belgrave Square.

The characters by whom this scene is inhabited are made alive also by minute touches of personality. The tripping-up of the parish beadle involves a group of seven characters, all amazingly portrayed ; but there is much more of interest on the opposite side of the street, not so much in the dancing figures as in the three street musicians who supply the music. One, who blows a serpentine horn, looks like a postboy who has lost his job ; the flautist in top hat, snow-crowned, and in a black frockcoat, is feeling the cold. We can see that by the way he stands. But the harpist is a wonderful study. He stands up to his harp as if he has been used to it for years. He is wearing what looks like an early edition of a bowler hat and has

a large and most peculiar collar, which Cruikshank must have observed in some particular person. I have studied this etching again and again and I become more convinced, every time, that this harpist is a widower. Something about him suggests that he, now, lives alone, in one room, in lodgings. He has even a resemblance to the classical appearance, black eyebrows, and bowler hat of Mr. George Robey, who portrays, in that, the embodiment or personification of a lodger. I find myself imagining a complete life for this harpist. I can see him, trundling along that heavy instrument, and slipping into, unostentatiously, a cheap chop-house, somewhere round the corner. I like, also, to think of his Sunday in lodgings, and I have come to the conclusion that he lived in Pentonville, not far from Cruikshank himself.

Our remaining two scenes from the *Comic Almanack* are divided, equally, between summer and winter. The first is August in London. This is, in my opinion, an immortal thing, in a small way. Its subject is the opening of the first oyster stall; only whether oysters were eaten, a hundred years ago, all through August, or whether this is the 31st August and the oysters are only a day before their time, I have been unable to discover. The scene





August in London, 1835

George Cruikshank

### *George Cruikshank*

would appear to be somewhere in the neighbourhood of Covent Garden. A wooden hoarding is background for the right-hand side of the composition, and this is covered with what might be called the primitives of poster art. A stack of empty oyster-shells is already accumulating upon the ground. There is a fine group of Cockney children, playing and running up to ask inappropriate questions, their way of hiding the fact that they want to beg for pennies; a prosperous-looking young man and his wife; and, in the left-hand corner, with his back to us, the dustman. The dustman was a favourite character with Cruikshank; and the subject, really, of this etching is the dustman's first oyster of the year. We are to imagine that the dustmen were repositories of popular anecdote and story. The hat he wears is direct ancestor to those worn today by his descendants. You must notice, also, the primitive form of hansom cab. I have seen these, also, in drawings of London by Constantin Guys, and I believe they are still to be found in the town of Quebec. This is a wonderful rendering of an August day in London. It would seem to be seven or eight o'clock on a breathless evening, with just the first touch of autumn in the air.

November in London, our next picture, is most

entirely appropriate to tonight. Tomorrow, the 5th of November, is Guy Fawkes' Day. On your way home tonight, some of you are sure to be approached by small children collecting pennies for their bonfire. Those of you to whom this happens will then remember this drawing and note the astonishing accuracy and truthfulness of all great artists, for the children who come up to you will be, in each and every respect, identical with those of a hundred years ago, tonight. Notice, also, the iron railings in this etching, which are so entirely typical of London. It is not improbable, too, that some of you will have caught the cold of that gentleman who is hurrying home, gloomily holding his handkerchief to his nose and dreading the seven days' total submersion that has only just begun for him.

Finally, let us look at the immortal "Early Morning." This is the only one of our illustrations which does not come from the *Comic Almanack*. It is taken from *Sketches by Boz*, the First Series, and it was published in 1837. This etching is so eloquent, for itself, that comment is hardly necessary. The street is such a street as can still be seen in Bloomsbury; I would mention, particularly, Doughty Street; or among the streets and terraces of Islington and Pentonville. The lamppost, in itself, is no less



George Cruikshank

*Early Morning, London*



### *George Cruikshank*

than a portrait of London. A little chimneysweep and his master are the only persons abroad at this hour. But I find it superfluous to try to add anything more to this picture of London. No painting of Venice by Canaletto is more true to its subject than this small sheet of paper with its image of the greatest city in the world. And this has been accomplished with the utmost economy of means, without the aid of colour and by under-statement. This is the immortal London, and no amount of pulling down and rebuilding will ever alter it.

There is, now, just time enough to speak of Cruikshank upon more general lines. The immense span of his life must be stressed. Before the year 1800 he was busily drawing away, as a child. His first published work dates from 1809, and his last from 1875. Three years later, in 1878, he died, aged 86. This person, who so often caricatured Napoleon, before Waterloo, lived to publish a satire upon the French Commune of 1871. It is no wonder that, in the eyes of his contemporaries, he had the gift of perpetual life. I have met several persons, still living, who remember him well. But the anachronism of his inordinately long career is best illustrated in a curious episode recounted by a Frenchman, M. Octave Aubry, who is the author

of a standard book upon English caricature. He came to England, as a young man, to work upon his subject, which was chiefly the political caricatures of Gillray. In a later edition of his book, published many years afterwards, he describes how, in those early days, walking down from Hampstead to the British Museum, he met, every morning, a tall, thin old gentleman, with an aquiline nose, who would look pointedly at him, as though waiting to speak to him. Not till many years later did he discover that this old man was no less a person than George Cruikshank, the one person who could have helped him, but whom he imagined to have been dead many years before.

Cruikshank had, in fact, been called in, after the death of Gillray, in 1815, to complete some of his unfinished plates. Gillray, I may say in parenthesis, is an artist whose caricatures I would give much to see enlarged to the scale of this screen. I do not suppose that this has ever been done; and the effect of his more complicated engravings would be magnificent and terrifying. It was in the manner of Gillray, then, that Cruikshank first appeared before the public, in large, coloured caricatures. Some of the best of his early works are the cruel satires upon George IV, still, then, Prince Regent, which were

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published under the titles of *Non mi Ricordo* and *The Queen's Matrimonial Ladder*. The famous *Life in London*, with its wonderful plates of popular and sporting life by George Cruikshank and his brother Robert, dates from 1821. *Life in Paris*, which came a couple of years later, is entirely by George Cruikshank, and the more striking because the extent of his foreign travels consisted in a day trip to Boulogne, undertaken many years *after* this book was published. These are works of the young Cruikshank, an amateur pugilist, and very much the reverse of the teetotaller he was to become in later life.

We will proceed with our enumeration of his chief works, for it is only in the knowledge of their wide scope and variety that the true Cruikshank will emerge. In 1827 came his coloured plates to *Greenwich Hospital*, one of the last of his works to be illustrated in colour, but a supreme instance of his understanding of nautical types. At about this time were published his etchings for *Grimm's Fairy Tales* and *Grimm's German Popular Stories*, the first works in which he demonstrated his wonderful phantasy and the lightness of his imagination. These books were extravagantly admired by Ruskin, who, with typical exaggeration, said that they were the finest things, next to Rembrandt's, that, so far

as he knew, had been done since etching was invented! In 1831 to 1838 we find him publishing his illustrations to the Novelists' Library, including novels by Fielding, Smollett, Sterne, and Goldsmith, in seventeen volumes. These are of interest, because they form about the first attempt at historical accuracy in costume, furniture, and so on. At the end of this time the *Comic Almanack* begins, and the two series of *Sketches by Boz*. We then get *Oliver Twist*, and his etchings to the *Memoirs of Grimaldi*, which also was edited by Charles Dickens. These are followed by *George Cruikshank's Omnibus*, a publication upon the lines of the *Comic Almanack*; an immense series of plates in illustration of Harrison Ainsworth; his etchings to Maxwell's *History of the Irish Rebellion*, terrible and wonderful things in their way; and his plates to the *Life of Sir John Falstaff*.

By now, for we have reached the year 1858, Cruikshank had become an ardent teetotaller. This was, in fact, the chief interest of his later years. Many of you must know *The Bottle* and *The Drunkard's Children*, two series of propaganda by Cruikshank which are among the most effective works of his hands. Later on, at the age of seventy, he spent between two and three valuable years of his life upon "The Worship of Bacchus," an immense

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oil-painting showing the follies of drink. I visited it, this summer, in the vaults of the National Gallery, and was told that three persons had asked to see it in the last thirty-five years—two of them, only to obtain the measurements of the picture in order to win a bet. The effort of painting this was the last big project undertaken by Cruikshank. After this, for another fifteen years, he only contributed an occasional frontispiece, or an illustration or two, for some unimportant book of fairy stories, or of imaginative phantasies. The important Cruikshank had ceased production in the 'fifties.

Now that the leading achievements of his long career are fresh in your memories it is possible to summarize these works under various heads, or into definite divisions. There is his early, Gillray manner, including political caricatures, various coloured books, and satires of fashion, such as the fashionable monstrosities of the 'twenties. Then we have his works of phantasy, *Grimm's Tales*, his wonderful etchings to the *Peter Schlemihl* of Chamisso, the four volumes of *George Cruikshank's Fairy Library* published in the 'fifties, and all his miscellaneous later frontispieces and stray illustrations done in this manner. There are his historical works, seventeen volumes of the *Novelists'*

Library, the *Life of Sir John Falstaff*, and his plates for Harrison Ainsworth; then there is the Cruikshank of *Oliver Twist* and of *Sketches by Boz*; the naval Cruikshank, so to speak, of *Greenwich Hospital* and of Dibdin's *Sea Ballads*; the theatrical Cruikshank of Grimaldi's *Memoirs*; the teetotal Cruikshank of *The Bottle* and *The Drunkard's Children*; the Cruikshank who etched enormous and crowded compositions, containing hundreds of figures, of which a specimen is his famous "Triumph of Cupid" for his magazine *The Table Book*; and last, but not least, the Cruikshank upon whom I have tried to speak to you this evening, the Cruikshank who drew *London Life and Character* for the *Comic Almanack*.

I hope that this rather tedious array of facts will have convinced you all of the fact that Cruikshank was a most serious and energetic worker. I do not suppose that, in the early part of his life, he ever got more than a guinea or two for a drawing; while we know, from his own statements, that in his old age, between 1860 and 1875, he was ready and willing to undertake any work, but that commissions never came to him. He had outlived his fame; and, of the thousands of people who knew his name, there were but few who realized that he was still alive.

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From all accounts Cruikshank was as much a character in his own person as many of the works of his pencil. In the words of one who knew him for many years: "He could remember, perfectly well, trifling occurrences which happened in 1800, and did not forget events of moment which had happened in 1877. A man incapable of rest, with a swift, glancing, steely eye, a mobile mouth, and a grotesquely fierce general aspect, aggravated by a hook nose, which was awry ; prodigal in matters of whisker, shirt-collar and wristband ; old-fashioned enough even, in 1845, for it to impress the mind of a child. The ingeniously arranged chevelure was within artful elastic bands drawn over the skull. I was one of many youngsters who would creep round his chair and endeavour to unravel the mysteries of that extraordinary coiffure, while the owner of it sat with a long clay pipe in his mouth and his brandy and water before him, talking loudly and eagerly, gesticulating like a Frenchman, and turning, now one ear and now the other, to catch the conversation of the company. He left a strong, indelible impression, even in the nurseries of the houses which he visited. These visits were always associated with late hours and uproarious laughter in the dining-

room. Cruikshank was always the last to go. To sum up, as a character, he was decidedly eccentric, obstinate, and whimsical!"

Every account of him that we can find tallies with this in its main characteristic, and, in every instance, tribute is paid to his unfailing kindness of heart, and to his burning ambition to redress every wrong. He was of the same generation, we must consider, as Disraeli, and, like him, retained through a long life the appearance and manners of the Regency, that brief but strangely flamboyant period in our history. At the same time, he was young enough to become imbued with the seriousness and the deep moral purpose which were the qualities, however much they may, now, be derided, of the great Victorians. It is in this respect that Cruikshank was so different from Rowlandson who, by comparison, was the unregenerate, unrepentant rake of the eighteenth century. You may look all through Rowlandson and see no sign that he wished to improve the world. He was content to leave it as he found it, having, in the meanwhile, enjoyed a good laugh at the expense of its more unfortunate inhabitants.

But this contrast between Rowlandson and Cruikshank leads us on into a discussion of the

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technique of Cruikshank. He was self-taught, if that phrase can be true of a person whose father, elder brother, and sister were all draughtsmen. He said, of himself, that he learnt to draw before he learnt to read or write. That, there is plenty of evidence to show in history, is the best school of all. But Cruikshank was possessed of a peculiar and most personal touch, one more alive with his own idiom and with his own idiosyncrasies, than that of any other popular draughtsman whom we can call to mind. His hand was the most close and perfect interpreter to the minute and whimsical turns of his imagination. It is impossible to consider his etchings as the finished products of a sedulously cultivated mind. They are the grains of his own personal character ; the rags or clouts of his person. His art was an instrument placed, so to speak, in the grasp of his fingers at his birth ; and which remained personal and exclusive to him down to the day when he laid it sadly and wearily aside, at the age of eighty-three.

I suppose that his most famous achievement is the plate of Fagin in the condemned cell. It is, indeed, impossible to deny the quality of greatness to that immortal thing. But the public for *Oliver Twist*, who content themselves with that, and who

pursue Cruikshank no further through the complicated mazes of his work, are denying themselves a true and lasting pleasure, which will not grow dimmer with familiarity. A love for Cruikshank cannot fail to increase with deeper knowledge of his activities. It is, even, a comforting reflection that he was born in London, and that he had no need to go further afield for his subjects. In this respect he affords a close parallel to Hogarth ; but Hogarth, as we know from his contemporary, *Vertue*, was under five feet in height and possessed of all the very small man's obstinacy and pride. He could not have the nervous energy of Cruikshank, and his elasticity of invention. It is easy to say that Hogarth was a painter, and Cruikshank only a draughtsman. But limitations of this sort are no more damning, in the case of Cruikshank, than they were in the case of Chopin. Cruikshank, moreover, if only because of the smaller limits of his art, could, at least, leave a subject before it had begun to grow tedious. There are, in fact, too many paintings in *Marriage à la Mode*, or in *A Rake's Progress* ; but not too many Cruikshanks in *The Bottle*. Cruikshank could continue the *Comic Almanack* for seventeen years, with an etching for every month that passed during all that long time.

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Hogarth, during a similar period, would have carried out a series, or more than one series, of paintings ; but would they convey to us more of esthetic pleasure than is contained in the quick and agile fancies of Cruikshank's brain ?

It is for these, and for many other reasons, that Cruikshank is considered by some to be the greatest English artist of the nineteenth century. This was the expressed opinion of Whistler ; and I have, myself, heard the same thing said by the old master of our living painters, Walter Sickert.

We have only had time, this evening, to look in meagre detail at a mere handful of etchings chosen at random from one phase, and out of one single publication, among all the diverse achievements of his career. Even so, I am in hopes that enough has been seen of his genius to establish him in a warm place in your hearts. In thinking of English art, George Cruikshank can never be, and will never be, forgotten. It is not an exaggeration to say that the whole of Dickens—and, after Shakespeare, who is immortal in our literature, if it is not Charles Dickens ?—it is not an exaggeration to say that the whole of Dickens has become visible to us through the eyes of Cruikshank. His interpretation of *Oliver Twist*, and of the *Sketches by Boz*, was only

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followed in feeble imitation by "Phiz" and others all through the works of Dickens.

But Cruikshank is more than strong enough to stand by himself. If he directs our view of Dickens, he is just as emphatic, just as eloquent, when it comes to the *Memoirs of Grimaldi*, or to fifty or a hundred books that it would be redundant for us to mention. This evening it has only been intended to show him to you as an interpreter of English life and character. I can only hope that the scenes of London which we have looked at together will remain for long in your memories and will endear to you the personality of one of the most truly English, or even Cockney, of artists. There is still, in spite of demolition and hideous rebuilding, a certain amount in our midst of Cruikshank's London. It is quickly going. It is certain, though, that as you go home tonight, you will remember Cruikshank's November in London. Even the lesser immortals are not so easily disposed of in a hundred years. He is still, to a recognizable extent, alive in the London streets; and, as long as London lasts, until London Bridge falls down, the London of Cruikshank will still be here, for those who have eyes to see and hearts to feel it.

